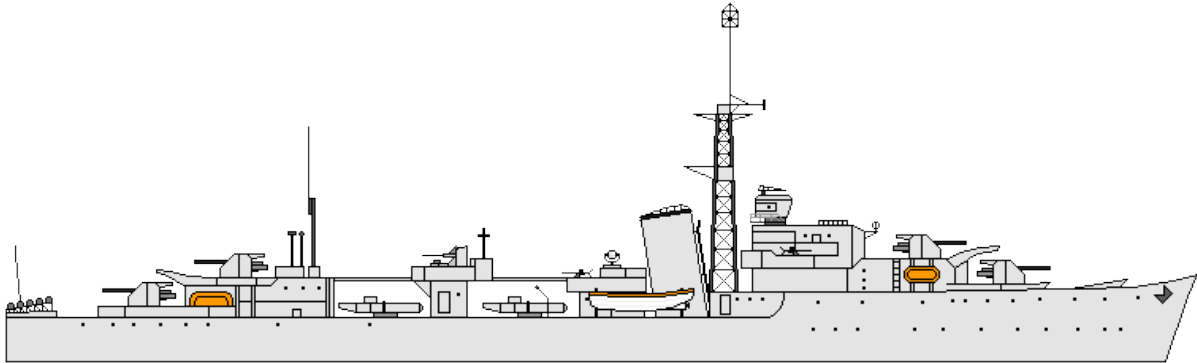


HMS WAGER

FLEET DESTROYER 1944-1946



In the trailer for his acclaimed film [Ocean](#) (2025), the former naval officer Sir David Attenborough¹ begins his introduction, saying “... the most important place on earth is not on land but at sea ... once you have truly seen the sea, you’ll never look at earth in the same way again ...”.

From the [Naval Prayer](#), “... that [the Fleet] may be a safeguard ... and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions ... and that we [sailors and Royal Marines] may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land, with the fruits of our labours ...”.

The most successful fighting force on the planet over the last 350 years, the [Royal Navy](#) has never been on the losing side in war – battles lost, ships, submarines and naval aircraft lost, admirals, officers, men and women lost but, in the end, a winner. The UK, an island trading nation, has become sea-blind, but these [facts](#) should serve as a reminder about ships and the sea today:

- today’s Royal Navy is too small to do the job that is required of it – roles that have not changed in centuries > the [UK’s shrinking Navy](#).
- the Royal Navy’s [Overseas Patrol Squadron](#) (known as the Fishery Protection Squadron until 2020), dates to the Fourteenth Century. It patrols some 80,000 square miles of sea.
- the UK has the world’s fifth largest [Exclusive Economic Zone](#) (EEZ).
- just over 70% of the surface of the planet is water – oceans, seas and bays.

- ships carry 90% of world trade – some 11 billion tons of goods.
- some 95% of UK trade by volume – 75% by value – is by sea.
- the UK has not been food self-sufficient since the 1750s.
- some 100,000 vessels call at UK ports each year, equivalent to one port call every five minutes 24/7/365, bringing consumer goods, food and imported products required for manufacturing, construction and for the energy consumed in our islands.
- some 50,000 merchant ships sail the Seven Seas. 33% are bulk carriers, 21% general cargo ships, 14% tankers, 10% container ships, 22% ferries, cruise ships and specialist vessels > **3 September is Merchant Navy Day.**
- some 20 million containers are crossing the globe right now! One 18,000 TEU container ship today carries as much cargo as a 50-ship convoy in the Second World War.
- shipping is the cheapest mode of transport per ton, with the lowest environmental footprint in the transport segment on a per-ton basis.

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Written by Lieutenant Commander Lester May RN to mark the 80th anniversary of VJ Day, 15 Aug 2025. The author was able to draw on his own experience from two ships in which he served in his naval career (1967-1989).

His appointment as Secretary to Captain 7th Frigate Squadron (Sec/F7), in [HMS *Jupiter*](#), for seventeen months from Jan 1977, brought experience of a Leader and a frigate squadron. The ubiquitous Leander class frigates were the backbone, the workhorse, of the Fleet in a similar manner to the way destroyers were deployed in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

As Supply Officer of the brand-new Type 22 frigate [HMS *Brave*](#), he joined the ship – Yard Number 1029 – at Yarrow Shipbuilders (YSL; now BAE Systems) in Sep 1985, at Scotstoun on the north bank of the River Clyde, about four miles south-east of John Brown's yard at Clydebank. He worked in the yard in 'Navy Offices' and lived ashore in a cottage in Old Kilpatrick, near Dumbarton, for nearly six cold and wet winter months until the ship's company 'moved onboard' on 14 Feb 1986.

On 13 Feb, CNSA² carried out a final inspection, which lasted most of the day. His diary further records for 14 Feb: "To the D448 Final Reading³ and later to

lunch with the YSL Directors. Storing progressed ... supper was the first meal cooked on board.”

16 Feb: “Lazy Sunday routine. Buffet luncheon in the wardroom⁴ for YSL.”

17 Feb: “Final storing and preparations for sailing. Yarrow staff and others joined (goodness – they eat a lot!). Captain hosted drinks on the bridge. Sailed at 1530 for machinery work up to full power and to anchor in Largs Bay.”

18 Feb: “Weighed anchor 0900 and continued Final Machinery Trials.”

19 Feb: “Last day of Final Machinery Trials. CNSA embarked pm and we began passage to Portsmouth.”

20 Feb: “At sea all day and to anchor pm off the Isle of Wight. Last of the middle watch snacks for the YSL hourly-paid workers.”

21 Feb: “Acceptance Ceremony – Captain formally signed for the ship from YSL. White Ensign displaces the Red Ensign⁵.”

HMS *Brave* was a platform for several new weapons and communications fits, as well as having Spey (rather than Tyne) engines for trials purposes. Thus, her trials programmes were to dominate the ship’s programme for a year or more. She was formally commissioned in Devonport on 4 Jul 1986.

I hope this helps to give some idea of what it might have been like for the ship’s company of HMS *Wager* in the early months of 1944. Of course, there was one huge difference – there was no war to consider in 1986!

In 2008 I wrote a brief history of the Second World War, of the Pacific Theatre of War and of the British Pacific Fleet; this is [posted elsewhere](#), and it includes information about senior British and US Officers and a Gazetteer of places mentioned. It also includes a filmography and list of abbreviations.

Note: In writing this narrative, I have drawn on journals published and not published, on information online and in books in my own maritime library. I have used no official documents and visited no archives or libraries. There are

likely some discrepancies, for different journals ascribe different dates for some events. Most of the journals with detailed operational and social commentary are from officers serving in HMS *Wager* but some were not written contemporaneously; sadly, there is all too little available to draw on from those on the lower deck.

Where names and nicknames of members of the ship's company are mentioned in the main text, I have not spent much time trying to decipher them – cross-referencing to the guesstimated Scheme of Complement may give an answer.



“I am not for war, I am for peace! That is why I am for a supreme Navy ... the supremacy of the British Navy is the best security for peace in the world ...”
(Vice Admiral Sir Jacky Fisher⁶ KCB (First Hague Peace Conference, May 1899))



Introduction

Today, it is fashionable to be embarrassed about British History and, particularly, the British Empire. Those who do so, some malign and some ill-informed, would do well to remember two things.

If Great Britain had not become the leading empire power in the 1800s and early 1900s, then another European power would have taken her place and done much the same. History makes clear that those other colonial powers were less-suited to the role and, with their smaller empires and colonies as examples, left a legacy less useful to those countries and the modern world.

No one pretends that all in the history of the British Empire is, or was, good. Sure, the British Empire was great, insofar as it was the largest Empire the world has known, covering approximately one-quarter of the world's lands. But the British Empire was certainly not all bad. The legacy of the English language, of law, democracy and diplomacy, of government and the civil service, of ingenuity and work ethic, of trade and commerce, the armed forces,

seafaring, railways and sport, of education, good manners and decency, should be remembered and, indeed, it might be a good thing for the world were the UK to resume leadership in some of those areas of life today!

It is often said that Britain stood alone in 1940. Well, she did, but Britain is a metaphor for the British Empire⁷ and she was 'alone' with the Anglophone peoples of Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Later, the peoples of India and the sub-Continent, of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, and the West Indies, would play prominent roles in the Allied Nations' fight as, of course, would that country once of the Empire, the United States of America. It is arguable that, without the then legacy and history of the British Empire, Britain might not have so successfully 'stood alone', and that the world might perhaps be very different today, had the Axis Powers prevailed in the 1940s, possibly for some time after 1945.

In this story of one ship in one flotilla, one destroyer had an Australian⁸ first lieutenant and another a medical officer from Canada. There may have been other 'colonials' serving among the 1,500 officers and men of the 27th Destroyer Flotilla.

This article was intended to be the story of one destroyer at war from 1944⁹ to 1945, just two years all told, fifteen months of war at sea, the other nine months completing at the shipbuilders, in refit and in playing a part in relieving post-war human misery in the Far East. As I researched this story, I wondered what the officers and men thought about their part in the bigger story, the wider context, the why and the how did we get here?

The Context – setting the scene¹⁰

- Britain – with her Empire and Commonwealth¹¹ Allies – was the only country to fight from the first day of the Second World War through to the last day of the War, almost six full years
- Britain was the only country to go to war for the principle of an ally (Poland) – all other protagonists declared war by attacking other nations or because they were attacked themselves; not Britain – she attacked no one and was not attacked when she declared war on 3 Sep 1939

- Britain was brilliantly led by her wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and invested 40% of its economy into the naval and military war effort, mobilizing more *pro rata* than the US or the USSR
- Perhaps surprisingly, Britain lost, relatively, fewer people than the other leading protagonists
- Britain was flat broke – bankrupt – at the end of the Second World War¹².

The Context – Britain and the World

- Population of the World > 2,300,000,000 (2.3bn) of whom 70 to 85 million died as a result of the [Second World War](#) (some 19 to 28 million died as a result of war-related disease and famine)
- Population of the British Empire > 545,463,825 (23.7% of the World)
- Population of Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) > 1940, some 47-48 million and, in 1944, some 47,750,000
- Men and women serving in the British Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services > 1940 – 2,273,000 (nearly 1 in 1,000 of the world's population) ♣ 1942 – 4,091,000 ♣ 1944 – 4,967,000
- Men serving in the British Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services > 1940 – 2,218,000 ♣ 1942 – 3,784,000 ♣ 1944 – 4,500,000
- Women serving in the British Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services > 1940 – 55,000 ♣ 1942 – 307,000 ♣ 1944 – 467,000
- British Army > 193,000 men in Sep 1940 ♣ 2,920,000 in Jun 1945
- Royal Air Force > 897,000 in Sep 1940 ♣ 950,000 in Jun 1945
- The Royal Navy was the largest and most powerful navy on the planet, with the largest number of overseas bases and arsenals. The RN had been the largest from the time of the Battle of Trafalgar (1805), through the century of *Pax Britannica* (1815-1914), until it was overtaken by the US Navy (USN) in the last years of the war, the USN being perhaps twice the size of the British and Commonwealth Navies at war's end.
- Number of major combat vessels built annually for RN > 1940 – 52 ♣ 1942 – 114 ♣ 1944 – 76
- Number of smaller vessels built annually for RN > 1940 – 375 ♣ 1942 – 1,049 ♣ 1944 – 1,651
- Royal Navy ship numbers at start of war and number commissioned during the war > Capital ships – 15 (in 1939) + further 5 (by 1945) = 20 ♣ Aircraft Carriers – 7 + 58 ♣ Cruisers – 66 + 35 = 101 ♣ Destroyers – 184 + 277 =

- 461 ✪ Submarines – 60 + 178 = 238 ✪ the totals of these are 332 + 553 = 885
- Royal Navy ship losses during the war > Capital ships – 5 ✪ Aircraft Carriers – 10 ✪ Cruisers – 34 ✪ Destroyers – 153 ✪ Submarines – 76 ✪ the total losses 278
 - Strength of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines (September each year) > 1939 – 180,000 (of whom 10,000 were officers) ✪ 1940 – 307,000 ✪ 1941 – 424,000 ✪ 1942 – 529,000 ✪ 1943 – 710,000 ✪ 1944 – 776,000 ✪ Jun 1945 – 783,000
 - Strength of the Royal Marines > Sep 1939 – 12,390 ✪ 1945 – 74,000
 - Strength of the QARNNS¹³ > Sep 1939 – 369 ✪ Jun 1945 – 3,800
 - Strength of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) (September each year) > 1939 – 0 ✪ 1940 – 7,900 ✪ 1941 – 15,100 ✪ 1942 – 33,300 ✪ 1943 – 60,400 ✪ 1944 – 74,000 ✪ Jun 1945 – 72,000
 - Casualties during the war – all ranks and ratings, RN and RM (as reported, 28 Feb 1946) > killed – 50,758 ✪ missing – 820 (340 were still missing 28 Feb 1946) ✪ wounded – 14,663 ✪ prisoners-of-war – 7,401 ✪ 102 WRNS were killed, 22 wounded
 - Royal Navy flag officers¹⁴ killed during the war > 1 Admiral (Sir Bertram Ramsay) ✪ 1 Acting Admiral (Sir Tom Phillips) ✪ 1 Vice Admiral (Lancelot Holland) ✪ 2 Rear Admirals (Henry Blagrove + Edward Spooner) ✪ one admiral, six vice admirals and five rear admirals lost their lives while serving as a [Convoy Commodore](#) ✪ all had been on the Retired List before the war and came out of retirement, being placed on the List of Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) officers – many were in their early 60s¹⁵
 - Casualties during the war – all ranks and ratings, all HM Forces (as reported, 28 Feb 1946) > killed – 264,443 ✪ missing – 41,327 (5,696 were still missing 28 Feb 1946) ✪ wounded – 277,077 ✪ prisoners-of-war – 172,592
 - The highest proportionate toll of any Western ally was the 11,900 New Zealander service personnel from a total population of then 1.6 million¹⁶.
 - US war losses – 418,500 all told of whom 29,263 USN and 19,163 USMC were lost in the East¹⁷
 - 300,386 officers and men of the [Imperial Japanese Navy](#) (IJN) died in the Pacific 1941-45 and the IJN lost 334 warships. Some 3.1 million Japanese people, all told, died in the broader [Asia-Pacific War](#), over 100,000 soldiers being killed in the Battle of Okinawa alone. All told, the IJN and Imperial Japanese Air Force lost 45,125 aircraft.

- Some five million are reckoned to have died under Japanese occupation in South-East Asia including the Dutch East Indies¹⁸.
- All told, between 25 and 36 million human beings died as a result of the Pacific War.
- Some 1,350 ships and submarines of the Royal Navy were sunk during the war, many while escorting merchant shipping. 228 British aircraft (all, or mostly, FAA) were lost in the Pacific in 1945.
- The British Merchant Navy¹⁹ was the largest on the planet in 1939, with about 2,500 ocean-going ships, some 33% of global tonnage (down from 45% in 1914). Some 200,000 seafarers were employed, many from overseas (50,700 were Indian and Chinese); of these, 30,248 merchant seafarers lost their lives in the war, a death rate proportionately higher than in any of HM Armed Forces; some 4,700 merchant ships were lost.
- At the turn of the 20th century, British shipbuilding yards on the Clyde and in the north-east of England built three out of five of the world's ships. Belfast, Birkenhead and Barrow were also important shipbuilding centres. British shipbuilding reduced markedly in the depressions of the 1920s and 1930s and was further reduced by overseas competition after the Second World War.
- Merchant ships completed annually in British yards (gross tons) > 1940 – 810,000 ➡ 1942 – 1,301,000 ➡ 1944 – 1,014,000
- London was the world's centre of maritime business and is still in prime position for maritime finance and maritime law, even though few shipping companies are now headquartered in London.
- London was the largest and busiest port on the planet in 1939, with some 69 miles of tideway and, inevitably, it became a frequent target for enemy aerial bombing. London is, in 2025, again the largest port in the UK.

Sir Max Hastings, in his superb history of the Second World War, [*All Hell Let Loose*](#) (HarperCollins, 2011), suggests that “the Royal Navy and the United States Navy were their countries’ outstanding fighting services” of the war. The Royal Navy, like no other service of any of the fighting nations, allied or enemy, was in action from the first to the last day of the *world* war – from 3 Sep 1939 to 15 Aug 1945.



Royal Navy (RN) destroyers came in two types during the Second World War – Fleet Destroyers and Escort Destroyers.

What is a Destroyer?

The destroyer came into being in the early 1890s as a Torpedo-Boat Destroyer, literally built to be a destroyer of torpedo boats; the first British destroyer was [HMS Havock](#) (1893) – small, at 275 tons, speed 26 knots and a complement of 46. The type of warship, small and fast, evolved to be larger, but still fast; the Yarrow-built S class destroyer HMS *Tyrian* (1919) made 39.72 knots during her builder's trials.

The destroyer became the workhorse of the Fleet. She had guns for warfighting and bombardment and torpedo tubes for anti-submarine work. Examples of classic destroyer work and actions:

- Enforcement of the arms blockade during the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939.
- Escorting convoys, particularly during the Battle of the Atlantic and Arctic Convoys throughout much of the war against Germany.
- Liberation, by Captain Vian's HMS *Cossack*, of British seafarers from the [German tanker Altmark](#) in a Norwegian fjord in Feb 1940.
- First naval Battle of Narvik, Apr 1940, in which Captain Bernard Warburton-Lee, commanding [HMS Hardy](#)²⁰ and the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla, won the Victoria Cross posthumously.
- Evacuation of Queen Wilhelmina of The Netherlands, from IJmuiden to England, on 13 May 1940.
- Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of British and French forces from the beaches of Dunkirk, May to Jun 1940 (see below).
- [Operation Claymore](#), the Commando raid on the Lofoten Islands in Mar 1941.
- Capture of *U-110* and the Enigma machine by HMS *Bulldog*, 9 May 1941.
- St Nazaire Raid, when HMS *Campbeltown* rammed the Normandie dry dock, 28 Mar 1942.
- Liberation of Guernsey by HMS *Bulldog*, and of Jersey by HMS *Beagle*, on 9 May 1945.
- Sinking of the cruiser IJN *Haguro* by destroyers of 26DF on 16 May 1945.

A destroyer's speed made her ideal as a Fleet Escort and for evacuation of people from distressed lands or soldiers from enemy-held beaches. Ideal for escorting fast capital ships or slower convoys or HM Royal Yacht on royal tour or a holiday around the Hebridean Islands. With the advent of aircraft carriers, a destroyer acted as plane-guard, keeping station off the carrier's port quarter, ready to rescue airmen from ditched aircraft and return them to the carrier in a [jackstay transfer](#) (a role taken over by the helicopter from the 1950s onwards). Destroyers ran a 'delivery service', delivering mails and stores from ship to ship in a Fleet and took classified signals²¹ and messages around the Fleet when the usual method of transmission was thought unsafe or insecure. Destroyers might transfer an admiral from flagship to ship, a medical officer from one ship to another and destroyers could rescue a large number of people from a sinking ship, such as [HMS Legion](#) going alongside the sinking aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* in the eastern Mediterranean in late 1941.

Old Destroyers²²

In 1939, there were some eighty old destroyers from the First World War but most of these old ships had not been completed by the time of the Armistice in November 1918. Unsuitable to modern sea warfare some twenty years later, most of the remaining R, S, T, V & W class destroyers, and the destroyer leaders of the Shakespeare class and Scott class, were employed in subsidiary, but nevertheless important, roles. They were modified for escort work, some to be called Escort Destroyers (anticipating the small Hunt class of 1939 onwards), others Short Range Escorts or Long Range Escorts. Hostilities started before much of the intended work was completed.

The [Evacuation of Dunkirk](#) (Operation *Dynamo*) took place from 26 May to 4 Jun 1940 and it was the 39 Royal Navy destroyers involved which evacuated the majority of more than 338,000 troops (some 120,000 were French). Six destroyers were sunk and 19 damaged (three French destroyers were also lost). Bar the involvement of one cruiser, which was damaged, destroyers were the largest warships employed in the evacuations.

The significant losses of destroyers at Dunkirk, and those requiring repairs after damage, were part of the reason for the [Destroyers for Bases Deal](#) (Lend-Lease) of fifty over-age destroyers from the United States Navy, starting

Sep 1940 – some were commissioned as the Town class in the Royal Navy, a few in the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN)²³.

British Destroyer Development from 1918²⁴

With sufficient destroyers surviving the First World War, no new destroyers were authorised until 1924, when two prototypes were put in hand – HMS *Amazon* and HMS *Ambuscade* were both launched in Jan 1926. From them stemmed the long line of the A to I classes²⁵ – some 72 two-funnelled destroyers (eight full flotillas of nine vessels, all some 1,300-tons, one of which was a Leader) for the Royal Navy and seven for the RCN. Each had a complement of about 140, each Leader about 175 or so.

This construction programme was halted in view of the larger destroyers being built by foreign navies and it was thought desirable to have British counterparts. The resulting Tribal class (16 RN, 3 RAN²⁶ and 8 RCN) were some 500 tons larger, with double the gun armament, half the torpedo fit and much-enhanced AA²⁷ armament.

The Tribal class were too expensive to be repeated in large numbers. There followed one-funnelled destroyers from the J and K classes to the W and Z classes and the C class – all similar proportions (1,690 tons + complement 183 (218 in a Leader)) except for the L and M classes which were larger (1,920 tons + 221/226 men). The L and M classes were also considered too expensive, such that the N class and subsequent classes were much the same as the J and K classes. Four of the N class were transferred to the RAN and two to the RCN in the war and about ten to the Poles, the Dutch and the Norwegians before war's end. Whereas the A to I classes comprised a Leader and eight destroyers in one flotilla, from J onwards a flotilla was the Leader and seven destroyers.

Thus, there was principally a standard design of destroyer from the J and K classes of 1938/39 onwards, longitudinally-framed vessels with two boilers, with a maximum speed of 36 knots, although the armaments and equipment varied considerably depending on availability and also, of course, improvements as the war years advanced. The quality of the steel used in wartime construction of the later destroyers was rather poor.

From the O class onwards, these destroyers were part of the [War Emergency Programme](#), some 112 built during the war, the O class ordered on 3 Sep 1939, the day that the UK declared war on Germany.

Escort Destroyers²⁸

These smaller vessels, 86 of the Hunt class (all bar two 907 to 1,087 tons + complement 146-168), were launched from Dec 1939 onwards, the last in late 1942. Some escort destroyers building for Brazil and Turkey were requisitioned and seven smaller vessels were transferred from the French Navy and six very small vessels from the Dutch. They were intended for fleet screening and convoy escorts.

W class – 9th Emergency Flotilla

The order for the W class – the [9th Emergency Flotilla](#) – was placed on 3 Dec 1941, four days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Generally, the Leader was named after a famous Captain of a Royal Navy ship in the Age of Sail²⁹ – from A to W and Z: *Codrington*, *Keith*, *Kempenfelt* (1931)³⁰, *Duncan*, *Exmouth*, *Faulknor*, *Grenville* (1935 – lost 1940), *Hardy* (1936 – lost 1940), *Inglefield*, *Jervis*, *Kelly*, *Laforey*, *Milne*, *Napier*, *Onslow*, *Pakenham*, *Quilliam*³¹, *Rotherham*³², *Saumerez*, *Troubridge*, *Grenville* (1942), *Hardy* (1943), *Kempenfelt* (1943), *Myngs*. There was no X class or Y class³³.

With no suitable name for a Destroyer Leader of the W class, the Ships' Names Committee³⁴ chose to use the name of [Richard Kempenfelt](#), victor of the Second Battle of Ushant, 1781. HMS *Kempenfelt* (1931) was the Leader of the earlier C class flotilla but the ship was transferred to the RCN in Oct 1939.

The names of the seven ships of the W class were all borne by previous commissioned ships of the Royal Navy; all are 'small ships' names – HM Ships *Wager*, *Wakeful*, *Wessex*, *Whelp*, *Whirlwind*, *Wizard* and *Wrangler*. All eight ships of the W class, including the Leader, were launched between 8 May 1943 and the penultimate day of that year.

HMS *Wager* was the third ship to be so named, the first a 24-gun ship purchased in 1739 and famously cast away³⁵ in 1741 on [Anson's](#) voyage. The second was a 6th Rate of 1744. These two ships may have been named after [Admiral Sir Charles Wager](#)³⁶ (1666-1743) but the destroyer HMS *Wager* (1943) most certainly was named after the former First Lord of the Admiralty 1733-1743.



HMS *Wager* – [ship's badge](#) ([acknowledgement](#))

The ship's badge is a play on the name. The Turf had been used to name warships before, there being a class of 32 Paddle Minesweepers delivered in 1916 and 1918 – the [Racecourse class](#)³⁷ – and the [24 class](#) of Minesweeping Sloops, all delivered in 1918-1919 and all named after horses that won The Derby³⁸ between 1877 and 1909. Some eleven ships of the Royal Navy were named HMS *Racehorse*, the last being the R class destroyer built by John Brown's (Yard Number 576), launched on 1 Jun 1942.

The ship's badge of HMS *Wager* is of a racing horse plate – a horseshoe: a white field with a blue cross, charged with five gold coins (bessants) with a red, inverted horseshoe.

The motto of HMS *Wager*³⁹ is *Spensione provoco* – I challenge with a wager.

A *wager of battle* was an ancient form of trial by personal combat between the parties or their champions (historical, *SOED*⁴⁰); a *wager of law* was a form of trial in which the defendant was required to produce witnesses who would swear to his or her innocence (historical, *SOED*). The former definition has led to the modern usage of a wager meaning a bet.

HMS *Wager* (1943)⁴¹ – construction and trials

HMS *Wager* was laid down at the yard of [John Brown & Company](#), Clydebank, Dunbartonshire, Scotland, on 20 Nov 1942 (the day⁴² that the British 8th Army recaptured Benghazi, Libya).

John Brown was a world-famous yard and had built the battlecruiser, [HMS Hood](#) (1918), the largest ship ever built for the Royal Navy⁴³, and many other capital ships, Canadian Pacific's RMS *Empress of Britain* (1930) and it was the yard of choice for the Cunard-White Star Line, building their transatlantic liners RMS *Queen Mary* (1934) – Yard [Number 534](#)⁴⁴ – and RMS *Queen Elizabeth* (1940) (Yard Number 552). Britain's last battleship, HMS *Vanguard*, some 42,500 tons displacement, was laid down on 2 Oct 1941. Situated at the end of the U-shaped fitting-out basin was the huge Titan crane⁴⁵, and it remains today, a remnant of the glory days of Clyde shipbuilding.

John Brown was a 'big ship' yard, not one known for building small ships like the famous destroyer yards of Denny, Thornycroft, White and Yarrow. Nevertheless, John Brown had built a few destroyers in the First World War and then two in most years of the 1930s through to 1945. Perfectionists might have wished for a traditional destroyer shipbuilder but, in wartime, needs must and, sad to say, some of the work of shipbuilders in wartime was soon lost to King Neptune and the Deep⁴⁶. Perfection was not the aim – ships built on time and able to operate reliably with the Fleet was the requirement. HMS *Kempenfelt* was also built by John Brown and two of the W class were built by Fairfield, two by Hawthorn Leslie and two by Vickers Armstrong at Barrow.

While Yard Number 603 was in the hands of John Brown & Company⁴⁷, from late 1942 until the Spring of 1944, the shipbuilder turned satisfactory results (as it had done every year bar two between 1920 and 1963). It is estimated that the cost of construction⁴⁸ of HMS *Wager* was some £525,000.

In 1943, some 20% of the workforce⁴⁹ at John Brown was engaged on the destroyer contracts.

HMS *Wager* proved to be a reliable servant of the Admiralty, consistently busy at sea from April 1944 until she paid off in Jan 1946. She did not break down (although suffered some defects that required repair in a dockyard), suffered

no action damage and was out of service only thrice – a very short refit in the UK in the early summer of 1944 to prepare her for service in the Far East, repairs in dry dock in Bombay in Nov 1944 and a six-week refit in Auckland in mid-1945 – after a year's hard war at sea, ship and sailors needed rest and repair – to prepare her for the anticipated last months or year of the war against Japan.

There were eight slipways at John Brown's, two very large (the east slipways). When HMS *Wager* was laid down in Nov 1942, there were under construction⁵⁰ seven other warships at the famous yard, one on every slipway (or berth, as shipbuilders call it).

It may be that HMS *Wager* was laid down on the slipway vacated, cleared of debris and prepared, just eleven days after the launch of HMS *Tumult*.

What a sight John Brown's yard must have been – and imagine the noise! On 20 Nov 1942, these ships were on slipways under construction (all destroyers unless stated; it took about eleven months before a destroyer would be launched) > (Yard Number):

- aircraft carrier HMS *Indefatigable* (laid down 3 Nov 1939, launched 8 Dec 1942, completed 3 May 1944) > Yard Number 565
- battleship HMS *Vanguard* (laid down 2 Oct 1941, launched 30 Nov 1944, completed 12 Jul 1946) > 567
- cruiser HMS *Bellerophon* (laid down 1 Oct 1941, launched 25 Oct 1945⁵¹) > 593
- escort carrier HMS *Nairana* (laid down 2 Nov 1941, launched 20 May 1943, completed 12 Dec 1943) > 577
- HMS *Hardy* (laid down 14 May 1942, launched 18 Mar 1943) > 600 (see endnote 25 below)
- HMS *Kempfenfelt* (laid down 24 Jun 1942, launched 8 May 1943, completed 25 Oct 1943) > 602
- HMS *Valentine* (laid down 8 Oct 1942, launched 2 Sep 1943) > 601

On 20 Nov 1942, these ships had been launched and were fitting out (all destroyers unless stated); it took four to five months to fit out a destroyer > (Yard Number):

- HMS *Relentless* (nearing completion, commissioned 30 Nov 1942) > 590
- HMS *Troubridge*⁵² (launched 23 Sep 1942, completed 8 Mar 1943) > 591
- HMS *Tumult* (launched 9 Nov 1942, completed 2 Apr 1943) > 592

Between the date of the keel being laid down and the launch of HMS *Wager* on 1 Nov 1943, these ships would be laid down at John Brown's (all destroyers unless stated) > (Yard Number):

- HMS *Caesar* (laid down 3 Apr 1943, launched 14 Feb 1944) > 605
- HMS *Cavendish* (laid down 19 May 1943, launched 12 Apr 1944) > 606
- frigate HMS *Loch Fada* (laid down 8 Jun 1943, launched 14 Dec 1943, completed 10 Apr 1944, four days before HMS *Wager*) > 614
- HMS *Crescent* (laid down 16 Aug 1943, launched 20 Jul 1944) > 607

While HMS *Wager* was fitting out, between her being launched on 1 Nov 1943 and her completion on 14 Apr 1944, these ships were laid down at John Brown's (three destroyers and one cargo liner) > (Yard Number):

- HMS *Crusader* (laid down 15 Nov 1943, launched 5 Oct 1944, completed 26 Nov 1945) > 608
- HMS *Barrosa* (laid down 28 Dec 1943, launched 17 Jan 1945, completed 14 Feb 1947) > 615
- HMS *Matapan* (laid down 11 Mar 1944, launched 30 Apr 1945, completed 5 Sep 1947) > 616
- mv *Port Wellington* (11,100 gross tons) for the Port Line (laid down 11 Feb 1944, launched 4 Feb 1946, completed 23 Sep 1946) > 628

The evidence here would seem to point to a short delay in the construction, before launching, of HMS *Wager*, one of the reasons likely was supply problems for critical equipment.

The ship's medical officer, in his journal, noted that several cruisers and destroyers were being repaired in the shipyard on 27 Mar 1944. Undergoing a short refit in the yard was the converted landing ship [HMCS Prince Henry](#), a former small ocean liner, the work for her including radar, communications equipment and small guns in preparation for the D-Day Landings.

The W class were the last British destroyers completed with 4.7-inch LA (low angle⁵³) main armament and the first entire class to be completed with lattice masts. The Mark 3 HA/LA DCT (director-control tower) was this class's major innovation. Like all destroyers before her, she had an open bridge.

Between the date the keel of HMS *Wager* was laid on 20 Nov 1942 and her completion on 14 Apr 1944, there was a huge building effort at British shipyards, let alone at yards overseas, in the US, Canada and Australia and, of course, there was also maintenance and repair work undertaken at these yards to keep the Fleet at sea. In the calendar year of 1943, these warships for the Royal Navy were launched (UK yards, except where stated; figures include those launched at John Brown & Company) – an average of over three a week in the UK alone:

- 3 light fleet aircraft carriers
- 3 escort carriers + 16 in US shipyards
- 3 cruisers
- 2 minelayers
- 37 destroyers
- 43 submarines
- 12 sloops
- 12 minesweepers/minesweeping sloops + 28 in Canada + 7 in Australia
- 16 corvettes + 24 in Canada
- 32 River class frigates + 37 in Canada + 4 in Australia
- 8 merchant aircraft carriers (MACs)

It is likely that a few of the ship's company, standing by HMS *Wager*, would have witnessed the launch of the destroyer HMS *Caesar* on 14 Feb 1944 and most may have watched the launch of HMS *Cavendish* on 12 Apr 1944, two days before the commissioning of HMS *Wager*. All three destroyers were the same size and dimensions.

Neither the Admiralty nor Winston Churchill indeed, were able to see the future and, at the time HMS *Wager* was ordered, the US had not declared war. At the time she was laid down, the tide had not turned in Battle of the Atlantic⁵⁴ and the war against Germany continued. Many destroyers were being lost and needed to be replaced in order to help the Allies ensure that victory in Europe was theirs. The Americans were having some success in the

Pacific War and the Royal Navy played a part in that war theatre, some disasters too, including the loss of the capital ships HMS *Repulse* and HMS *Prince of Wales* in Dec 1941, the loss of Hong Kong in late 1941, and the surrender of Singapore in early 1942. The Royal Navy's focus was the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean theatres of war. The surrender of Italy, and of the Italian Fleet in early Sep 1943 was, of course, helpful for the Allied Powers and the Royal Navy, particularly in the Mediterranean Sea.

Construction of HMS *Wager* continued through 1943 until, three weeks short of a year after she was laid down, the ship was launched⁵⁵ on 1 Nov 1943 (just short of two years since the order for her was placed).

HMS Wager (1943) – statistics

Displacement – 1,710 standard tons

Dimensions (feet) – 339½ (between perpendiculars), 362¾ (overall) x 35¾ (beam) x 10 (draught, at standard displacement)

Machinery – 2 Admiralty three-drum boilers, 2-shaft geared Parson impulse reaction improved single-reduction geared Turbines + underslung single flow condensers

Shaft Horsepower (SHP) – 40,000 = 36¾ knots

Propellers – 2, made of manganese bronze

Range – 4,675 nautical miles⁵⁶ at 20 knots

Armament – 4 (4 x 1) 4.7" Mk IX guns⁵⁷ (A turret + B, X, Y from for'd to aft)

Armament – 1 – Hazemeyer twin-40mm Bofors Mk III (1 x 2) guns

Armament – 4 – 20mm Oerlikon Mk V AA* (2 x 2); probably replaced by the single Hazemeyer Bofors gun above

Armament – single QF 2-pounder (20mm) Mk XVI

Armament – 8 – 21-inch (2 x 4) Torpedo Tubes Mk IX

Armament – 4 depth charge throwers (2 x 2) on the quarterdeck; 70 depth charges

Mk III Rangefinder and DCT abaft the bridge (the latter fully dual-purpose, capable of directing both surface and AA gunfire)

Radar – 4 types of radar > Type 276, Type 282, Type 285, Type 291

Complement – 186-190 men (some state 225 men but 222 in Leaders);

Signalman Ted Longshaw estimated that 75% of the Leading Hands and Able Ratings were HOs (Hostilities Only – men signed on for the war only)

* Oerlikons had replaced the ship's searchlight.

AA = Anti-aircraft.

DCT = Director-Control Tower

There is a detailed starboard profile view of the destroyer HMS *Quilliam* on the HMS *Wager* website, along with [deck plans and a hold plan](#). This is accompanied by [detailed descriptive and explanatory notes](#). A plan of HMS *Wager* would have differed but not very much.

Movement through and around the ship was not always straightforward. The requirement for watertight bulkheads and stability trumped all else (and certainly convenience!). It may not have been possible to go from one end of the ship to another except by use of the upper deck and, as in all ships, there were ladders everywhere to go from one deck to another, those going into the machinery spaces, tanks, magazines, sonar equipment rooms and storerooms almost all vertical.

Traditionally, warships' hull colour schemes differed according to the Fleet in which they served – dark grey for the Home Fleet, a lighter colour for warmer climes. This would have been abandoned, although perhaps not entirely, in the war, in favour of camouflage painting or disruption painting, the aim of which was to disrupt the view an enemy might have through his binoculars.

The destroyers would show their Flotilla number by [coloured bands](#) around the funnel but this system did not work well when so many destroyer flotillas were at sea. The Leader of a flotilla would have a three-foot deep band (colours were white, red or black) but black and white photographs have not helped the determination of the colour! This rather [good photograph](#) shows the hull and a thin flotilla band on the funnel – not white, red perhaps?



The first of a new build ship's company is invariably the Marine Engineer Officer. He joins soon after launch and works closely with the shipbuilder on behalf of the Admiralty, working in concert with representatives of the Admiral Superintendent Contract-Built Ships (ASCBS⁵⁸). Lieutenant (E) T E Butlin RN⁵⁹ (Tom Butlin) reported to John Brown's in Aug 1943 and he would soon be followed by his key Engineering Artificers – propulsion experts, naval

shipwrights – and the Chief Stoker and some of his stokers, including the Engineer's Writer⁶⁰, Stoker I E W Elwick (Ted Elwick).

The 'Gunner T' joined on 22 Dec 1943. Acting Commissioned Gunner (T) H A Mitchell DSC RN was the ship's Torpedo Gunnery Officer and also responsible for the ship's electrics⁶¹; it is likely that one or two of his petty officers joined around the same time.

Temporary Sub-Lieutenant Christopher Stewart-Lockhart RNVR – 'Kit' – joined the ship in Jan 1944 and he was likely responsible for everything to do with the ship's navigation and seamanship in advance of the CO, 1st Lt and Navigating Officer joining in the coming months. For example, he would have to ensure that the correct outfit of Admiralty Charts was delivered and then keep them up-to-date! He would become the ship's Gunnery Officer ('Guns').

The First Lieutenant, Lieutenant Richard Trowbridge RN, was the second-in-command (the Executive Officer) and he joined on 3 Feb 1944. He was in charge of ship's routines and would write the ship's orders. The Captain, Lieutenant Commander Roland C Watkin RN⁶² – 'Basher' Watkin – joined sometime later in Feb 1944, a month or two before the start of builder's sea trials. The ship was allocated a "dingy office" shoreside.

Four other ship's officers – the 'watchkeeping officers' – joined in mid-Mar 1944 and the ship's Medical Officer (MO), Temporary Surgeon Lieutenant George Gayman RCNVR, joined 27 Mar 1944. By this time, HMS Wager was the outboard of three destroyers, alongside in the shipyard, dockyard mateys not necessarily seeming to be working, noted the MO.

A few of the new ship's company – senior ratings – would gradually start to join the ship in the first months of 1944. On 2 Apr 1944, an advance party of ratings joined the ship, including cooks and stewards. The bulk of the ship's company, particularly the junior ratings (Leading Hands and Able Seamen, and their equivalents in other branches) would be in Glasgow for no more than a few days before the 'move on board,' some having completed various training courses and others being sent south from Glasgow, after joining the ship, for further courses.

The depot – a ‘stone frigate’ – HMS *Spartiate* was a small office located in St Enoch’s station, Glasgow, and sailors reported there to learn of their accommodation (and, perhaps, their new ship) while ‘standing by’ a warship under construction on the Clyde. All officers and men would be living ashore, most in digs, working from shore offices (although a few employed on board) until the big day – the ‘move on board’ and the very first day of sailing, for builder’s sea trials, just two or three days later. There was much work to do in this new ship before the ship’s company had their first meal on board and slung their hammock for the first night’s sleep – cleaning ship, cleaning the galley and food spaces and storing ship with food not least among them.

Junior Ratings⁶³ – Leading Hands and Able Ratings – messed together in several messdecks; there were about 16 telegraphists and signallers in one of the messes. There, a rating would sling his hammock – which were close together – stow it each day, eat his meals, drink his tot (if over 20) and play cards. There was nearly always a hammock slung, someone trying to sleep having had a night watch. Chief Petty Officers and Petty Officers had separate messes, as did the ERAs⁶⁴.

Popular Service quotation

“The Army arms the man, the Navy mans the arms”

27th Destroyer Flotilla (27DF) – formation

HMS *Kempenfelt* was launched on 8 May 1943, four weeks before the second of the flotilla, appropriately the Half Leader, HMS *Whelp*, went down into the water at Hebburn on the River Tyne.

Other W class destroyers were launched at the end of Jun 1943 and in August and September. The last to be launched was HMS *Wrangler* on 30 Dec 1943. The destroyers are listed here in the order of date completed.

The 27th Destroyer Flotilla (27DF) was formed, formally, on 18 Jul 1944 but 27DF (without HMS *Wizard*) did not operate together until late 1944 and seldom thereafter, coming together as an eight-ship Flotilla for the first time in Aug 1945.

All eight destroyers survived the war. After the war, some were reduced to reserve, like HMS *Wager*. In the 1950s, two were sold to Yugoslavia and two to South Africa. The four remaining ships were converted, 1951-1954, along with nineteen other 'emergency' destroyers of the R, T, U, V, W and Z classes, into [Type 15 anti-submarine frigates](#) and emerged with rather a different profile. HMS *Wrangler* was sold to South Africa in 1957 and the other three served in the Royal Navy for some twenty more years. The last of the W class, HMS *Wakeful*, paid off in 1970.

[HMS *Kempenfelt*](#) (Pendant Number⁶⁵ R03) was adopted by the Borough of Hammersmith, London, during Warship Week⁶⁶, Mar 1943. After completion, she had no Destroyer Flotilla to lead and she joined the 24th Destroyer Flotilla in the Mediterranean in Dec 1943, being involved in Operation *Shingle*, the Allied landings at Anzio in early 1944. She was involved in the Normandy Landings (Operation *Neptune*, part of Operation *Overlord*) on 6 Jun 1944. Her refit prior to being deployed to the Far East was in Cardiff from late August.

She served with the Eastern Fleet and, as Leader of the 27th Destroyer Flotilla, from 22 Nov 1944. She saw service with the British Pacific Fleet and was refitted in Sydney in May to Jul 1945. At Hong Kong from Sep 1945, she returned to the UK, arriving Chatham in Jan 1946.

In late 1947, she was one of four of the former 27DF to be allocated to the South Atlantic Reserve Fleet in Simonstown, South Africa. She returned to the UK in 1955 and was placed on the Disposal List. With HMS *Wager*, HMS *Kempenfelt* was sold to the Yugoslavs; she was renamed *Kotor* (R21).

Battle Honours for the Second World War > ATLANTIC 1939 • ANZIO 1944
• NORMANDY 1944 • OKINAWA 1945

[HMS *Wakeful*](#) (R59) was adopted by Darwen, Lancashire. She commissioned on 17 Feb 1944 and was soon part of Operation *Tungsten*, the air attacks on the battleship *Tirpitz* in Altenfjord. She was involved in other operations off the coast of Norway in May 1944. She saw service with the Eastern Fleet and BPF and, after the signing of the Instrument of Surrender, she remained in Japanese waters helping with the repatriation of allied nations. She returned to the UK at the end of 1945. Converted to a Type 15 frigate, she was in service until 1970 and sold for scrapping in 1971.

Battle Honours for the Second World War > ATLANTIC 1939-40 •
DUNKIRK 1940 • NORTH SEA 1944 • EAST INDIES 1944

[HMS Wizard](#) (R72) was adopted by the Borough of Wood Green, in north London. She was commissioned 30 Mar 1944 and her first work was with a mixed group of destroyers with the Home Fleet, screening two aircraft carriers. Following a depth charge explosion⁶⁷ on board on 9 Jun 1944, repairs lasted until Jun 1945, first in a dry dock (probably [AFD14](#)) at [Lyness](#), Scapa Flow, and then in commercial hands in Middlesbrough. She joined 27DF in Aug 1945 but saw no operational service in the war. She served in the local flotilla at Plymouth until she was converted to a Type 15 frigate, 1953-1954. She was one of the Dartmouth Training Squadron for four years from about 1959, before being paid off in 1966. She was scrapped in 1967.

Battle Honours for the Second World War > none

[HMS Wager](#) (R98) completed 14 Apr 1944.

Battle Honours for the Second World War > EAST INDIES 1944 •
OKINAWA 1945 (but see 'Battle Honours' below)

[HMS Whelp](#) (R37) was adopted by the Borough of Wembley, London. She was completed 25 Apr but not commissioned until 14 Jul 1944. She was the Half Leader of 27DF – a Commander in command – and she and HMS Wager were “chummy ships”, working closely together, for the next eighteen months, although she refitted in Melbourne, not Auckland. She returned to Portsmouth on 17 Jan 1946. In late 1947, she was one of four of the former 27DF to be allocated to the South Atlantic Reserve Fleet in Simonstown, South Africa. She was sold to South Africa and commissioned as SAS *Simon van der Stel* in 1953. Her career with the SAN started with a long foreign goodwill deployment but later it was chequered, in and out of commission, in and out of reserve. She was paid off in 1972 and scrapped in 1976.

Battle Honour for the Second World War > EAST INDIES 1944 • OKINAWA 1945

[HMS Wessex](#) (R78) was adopted by the Borough of Worthing, Sussex. She was completed and commissioned on 11 May 1944. Her first deployment was a short while with the Home Fleet. She served with the Eastern Fleet and British Pacific Fleet. She returned home in Dec 1945 and was reduced to reserve. In late 1947, she was one of four of the former 27DF to be allocated to the South Atlantic Reserve Fleet in Simonstown, South Africa. Sold to South Africa in 1950, she was commissioned as SAS *Jan van Riebeeck*. From 1953, manpower shortages meant she was in reserve for many years and it is surprising that she was converted to an anti-submarine frigate 1964-1966. She was a training ship 1971-1972 and was paid off in 1975. She was sunk as a target in 1980.

Battle Honours for the Second World War > ATLANTIC 1939-40 • EAST INDIES 1944 • OKINAWA 1945

[HMS Wrangler](#) (R48) was adopted by Lincoln. She was completed 14 Jul 1944 and worked up in Scapa Flow⁶⁸ with ships of the Home Fleet. From 14 Jan to 19 May 1945 she was in dockyard hands in Bombay in order to have her boiler tubes replaced. She subsequently rejoined the BPF. She returned to the UK, arriving Plymouth 16 Dec 1945. She was used as a harbour training ship before conversion to a Type 15 frigate 1951-1953. She was sold to South Africa in 1956 and commissioned as SAS *Vrystaat*. She was placed in reserve in 1963, deemed too expensive to repair after significant galvanic corrosion problems were identified. She was sunk as a target in 1976.

Battle Honours for the Second World War > ATLANTIC 1939-40 • NORWAY 1940 • OKINAWA 1945

[HMS Whirlwind](#) (R87) was adopted by the New Forest in Hampshire. She was completed on 20 Jul 1944 and commissioned four days later. She arrived at Trincomalee in late Nov 1944 and served with the Eastern Fleet and BPF. On 22 May 1945, in company with HMS *Kempenfelt*, she escorted HMS *Formidable* to Sydney and then was taken in hand for refit. She was in Hong Kong late 1945, undertaking repatriation work, and returned to Chatham on 15 Jan 1946. Converted to a Type 15 frigate 1951-1953 and was in service until placed on the Disposal List in 1966. Selected for use as a target in weapons trials, she unfortunately foundered in foul weather in Cardigan Bay and was lost on 29 Aug 1974.

Battle Honours for the Second World War > ATLANTIC 1939-40 •
NORWAY 1940 • OKINAWA 1945



Seasons, temperatures and weather systems during HMS Wager's time at sea – a ship with an open bridge and no modern air conditioning – from Apr 1944 to Jan 1946

Jan to Mar 1944 – Winter in Glasgow > cold and wet!

Apr to Jul 1944 – Spring and Summer in Home Waters

mid-June 1944 – One of the warmest three months of the year in Spitsbergen, average temperatures are between +2°C and -2°C in this part of the Arctic

Aug 1944 – High Summer in the Mediterranean

(Jun to Sep 1944 – India's Summer Monsoon season)

(Oct 1944 to Feb 1945 – India's Winter Monsoon season (aka Northeast Monsoon))

Sep 1944 to Jan 1945 – Five months entirely in the Tropics 🌐 much of the Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean is a source area of tropical cyclones, with the Pacific hurricane season north of the Equator, from late Spring until Autumn

Feb 1945 – Well south of the Tropics, high Summer coming to an end in Australia, with average temperatures of 25°C in Fremantle and 23°C in Sydney

Mar 1945 – Manus is 2° south of the Equator, the weather varies little > 30°C – it's hot! Not quite so hot as Ulithi Atoll is reached. Sakishima Gunto is a similar latitude to Bahrain and Dubai – still hot > March marks the beginning of the beach season in the Ryukyu Islands – 20°C!

Apr 1945 – 23°C in the Ryukyu Islands, 29°C in Leyte.

(Typhoon *Connie*⁶⁹ caused considerable damage to US aircraft carriers and aircraft, with men lost overboard or killed, in the first week of Jun 1945)

May to Jul 1945 – Late Autumn and early Winter in Auckland, NZ (37°N), average temperatures are around 15°C in May to 13°C in July

Aug 1945 – Manus > 27°C + Guam > 29°C + Tokyo 29°C

Sep 1945 – Tokyo (36°N) in late Summer, average temperatures 24-25°C

Oct 1945 – Hong Kong (23°N) and southern China, average temperatures 24-25°C

Nov 1945 – Darwin > 30°C + Sydney > 25°C

Dec 1945 – Singapore > 27°C + Colombo > 27°C + Aden > 27°C
Jan 1946 – Gibraltar > 14°C + almost the height of Winter in Portsmouth – cold and wet!
Jan to Feb 1946 – War Service Leave in Winter but, I wager, sailors cared not!

HMS Wager – in commission, serving with the Home Fleet

HMS Wager was adopted by the civil community of the village of Middleton, on the Heysham Peninsula in Lancashire, probably during Warship Week 1942.

The MO's personal journal, written in Tokyo Bay, states that the ship's commissioning ceremony was on 3 Apr 1944. Having seen that the ship was in something of a mess just nights before, the Canadian MO was surprised to see that she was 'spick and span' on the morning of commissioning, "as if a fairy had waived a magic wand during the hours of darkness."

The MO wrote that some 200 ship's company arrived in the forenoon and moved on board with their gear and tried to stow it.

It rained all day, drizzle mostly, on Monday 3 Apr 1944. The Chaplain of the Fleet arrived and there was a simple commissioning service in the fore'd messdeck. In the evening there was a party in the wardroom for dockyard officials. The MO writes,

"Our real commissioning celebration was scheduled for the evening of Apr. 4th. I invited two charming ladies who devoted a good deal of their time to the efficient management of the Officers' Club. We conversed pleasantly for a couple of hours sipping the P.O.⁷⁰ Steward's cocktails; then they decided to leave. Many other respectable people left about the same time, the Captain's wife taking her husband by the arm and leading him out of the ship. Then the party began and – well nearly all subsequent parties in Wager have been like the latter end of the first one: such is the price we pay for having a steward who cannot resist the temptation to mix things."

With most of her ship's company having moved on board, her first day underway at sea was on 5 Apr 1945, the start of Acceptance Trials, during which the officers and men would become familiar with the [Tail of the Bank](#) – Tail o' the Bank – an anchorage off Greenock. Trials took nearly two weeks

and several of John Brown's foremen and technicians remained aboard to finish odd jobs and to see that the ship was properly completed. After successful completion, the ship was formally Accepted into the Fleet, a representative of ASCBS signing for her, on behalf of the Admiralty, on 14 Apr 1945 – the White Ensign displaced the Red Ensign.

HMS *Wager* was never self-accounting and always a tender for accounting purposes, either to the large Destroyer Depot Ship HMS *Tyne*⁷¹ or to the base in Ceylon, HMS *Highflyer*. This is reflected in the ship column of a RN rating's Service Certificate⁷², in the manner '*Tyne (Wager) or Highflyer (Wager)*.'

For much of her life, HMS *Wager* would often proceed in the open sea, where possible, on a zig-zag course, adopted to help counter the threat of attack by submarines. The ship's machinery spaces were large relative to the size of the ship and, especially at high speeds, the ship would be noisy – and crowded messdecks were, of course, noisy too. Much space was taken up with compartments related to fighting the ship – magazines, asdic, radar, communications – and storerooms were omnipresent. Accommodation was not the highest priority!

The ship sailed to Rosyth, the naval dockyard in Fife, on the River Forth, where she had her radar equipment fitted. Then it was north to Scapa Flow to 'work up' (to bring the ship and ship's company to a reasonable level of operational efficiency, able to sail the ship safely and to operate equipment. Two sister-ships were there too, as was the depot ship HMS *Tyne*, and that provided some company and for some socialising by officers, useful to get to know the people one would be working with on operations. The Flotilla Gunnery Officer and the Flotilla Torpedo Officer embarked in HMS *Wager* to assist with the training. Two more sister-ships arrived and it was at Scapa Flow that the close working relationship with HMS *Whelp* was established.

There was some recreation ashore at Scapa Flow, sports and games, walks and beer in the recently-opened Officers' Club.

Work up completed by 7 May 1944, HMS *Wager* joined a task force of ships for [Operation Hoops](#), the purpose of which was to fly naval aircraft from two aircraft carriers to attack enemy shipping off the coast of southern Norway. As part of the screen, destroyers were typically fifty miles off the coast. When

acting as plane guard for an aircraft carrier, the destroyer would have to maintain station, turning into wind to follow the carrier and, in this first trip, with fairly rough weather, a significant number of the ship's company suffered sea sickness while the ship was rolling and pitching. An enemy ship was damaged and a few aircraft were lost by both sides, one FAA aircraft ditching near HMS *Wager*; a number of attempts to rescue the pilot using the ship's whaler regrettably failed.

While underway at 30 knots, one of the ship's company slipped and dislocated his shoulder; once the MO had put the rating back together, he was put to bed in the captain's day cabin, the upper deck too dangerous in the storm for such a patient to be taken, let alone up and down ladders, to his messdeck. After two days, the ships returned to Scapa Flow on 9 May, where the patient was taken ashore to hospital. For some of the young sailors, especially the HOs⁷³, this was likely their first experience of war.

Three days later, on 12 May, she was one of the ships allocated to [Operation Pot Luck](#), creating a diversion off the coast of central Norway (between Rørvik and the Frohavet Channel, near Trondheim – about 360 miles NE of Scapa Flow) during [Operation Brawn](#). The ship returned to Scapa Flow on 16 May.

On 28 May HMS *Wager* sailed on [Operation Tiger Claw](#), an unrealised plan for an attack on the Tirpitz; it was called off because of atrocious weather at sea. Instead, she took part in Operation *Lombard*, a strike against enemy shipping in the Ålesund area, between Bergen and Trondheim. The aim was to distract enemy forces during the build-up to D-Day, which was imminent. The ship returned to Scapa Flow in 2 Jun 1944.

All these operations were classic destroyer screens for larger ships, typically aircraft carriers of various types. The ship's company were given some information over the ship's Tannoy but, for the most part, could see little and knew little of the bigger local picture.

There followed a short involvement in [Operation Kruschen](#), on 7 and 8 Jun, again off Norway but the weather was unsuitable for flying and the operation cancelled. Back in Scapa Flow, HMS *Wager* was ordered alongside the depot ship HMS *Maidstone* to undergo a boiler clean, her place as duty destroyer taken by sister-ship HMS *Wizard*.

On 16 Jun 1944, HMS *Wager* sailed, with HMS *Whelp*, for [Operation Ploughshare](#). The two destroyers sailed to the Faroe Islands to r/v⁷⁴ with the cruiser HMS *Jamaica* and they also took on fuel. There, the MO escorted a patient, a Petty Officer, ashore to the army hospital returning in the same Fairmile motor launch that had been sent the ten miles to the destroyer. The MO was greeted back on board HMS *Wager* by the MO of HMS *Whelp* who had just reduced a stoker's strangulated hernia.

The destroyers escorted the cruiser, which was taking supplies for the garrison⁷⁵ and relief personnel to Spitsbergen, in the Svalbard archipelago, some 600 miles north of the top of Norway, well inside the Arctic Circle. It was very cold! On passage to the destination, another of the ship's company had reported to the sick bay and was under medical care for three days. In Spitsbergen, HMS *Wager* was alongside the cruiser, and the MO took advantage of the larger ship's medical facilities; three naval medical officers operated on the sailor and he made an "uneventful post-operative recovery⁷⁶."

HMS *Wager* sailed south on 20 Jun, taking with her one 'souvenir', a six-week-old husky puppy⁷⁷, the creature making its first visit to Scapa Flow on 24 Jun 1944. Two young officers' journals allude to the 'Battle of Scapa Flow' – hard partying in the wardrooms of DF27.

On 30 Jun 1944, HMS *Wager* sailed Scapa Flow, with sister-ship HMS *Wakeful* in company, escorting the newest battleship in the Fleet, the 35,000-ton HMS *Howe* (1940), to the River Clyde. At Greenock, HMS *Wager* was tied up alongside the depot ship HMS *Sandhurst*⁷⁸. In the last week or so before sailing she was towed to [Govan](#) and entered a dry dock for a few days; it may be that this was where work was undertaken to better prepare her for the months ahead. HMS *Wager* was, after all, built for the North Atlantic but about to sail for the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean – some air conditioning perhaps and certainly anti-aircraft guns (if they were not part of her original outfit of weaponry).

While at Greenock, the ship's company were granted Foreign Service Leave and, for some, the bright lights of London called. Their partying continued with such gusto that the captain stopped wardroom wine bills⁷⁹ for a while.

So ended the ship's short time with the Home Fleet. On 25 Jul 1944 HMS *Wager* was again at the Tail of the Bank.

HMS *Wager* – passage to Gibraltar and East of Suez

On 26 Jul, with HMS *Wakeful* in company, HMS *Wager* sailed Greenock, in order to escort the 25,550-ton troopship, the Union-Castle liner RMMV *Stirling Castle*⁸⁰, which had been tasked to take some of the civilian population, many evacuated in 1940, back to the Rock of Gibraltar. After a calm passage in fine weather, the group arrived on 1 Aug 1944 and first went alongside an oil to take on fuel and then to the 'destroyer pens' in the harbour. From the journals, it is clear that the young officers and men had a good ten days of 'runs ashore' on 'The Rock'! Included in the officers' run ashore was the almost obligatory visit to the NOP – the Naval Officers' Pavilion⁸¹ – and the Yacht Club. The MO organised a flight in a FAA aircraft over the Strait of Gibraltar and Morocco and the Gunner (T) taught him the art of oriental bartering on a run ashore along Main Street.

On 10 Aug 1944, HMS *Wager* sailed, in company with HMS *Wakeful*, for Algiers, a passage of some 500 miles. On passage, the ships conducted anti-submarine exercises and gun shoots, doing particularly well with the LA shoot. They arrived 11 Aug and the next day HMS *Ramillies* arrived, escorted by HMS *Whelp* and HMS *Wessex*. Beach parties and sometimes riotous runs ashore are recorded in more than one journal! On one run ashore to a club, some officers from all three destroyers were present, including Lieutenant Prince Philip of Greece. The MO makes clear that they had learned the art of bribery – a gin in the wardroom for the transport officer ashore and, like magic, a lorry was loaned from the transport pool for an afternoon's run ashore, both to the beach and the hinterland. The [MO's journal](#) is a delight!

The group sailed 13 Aug, the destroyers escorting the old 29,150-ton battleship [HMS *Ramillies*](#) (1916), then in what was to be her last year of seagoing service, to some fifty miles south of Corsica; she was to be part of [Operation Dragoon](#), the allied landings in the South of France.

Then the two destroyers headed for Malta, passing large numbers of landing craft as they headed for the Allied invasion, arriving in the GC island⁸² on 15 Aug 1944. Destroyers tended to anchor in [Sliema Creek](#) but HMS *Wager*

went alongside in [Dockyard Creek](#), in the magnificent [Grand Harbour](#), Valletta. She would have been close to Fort St Angelo⁸³ and a short [dghajsa](#) trip across the [Grand Harbour](#) to spots not-at-all magnificent but more famous to sailors, the bars and bordellos of Strait Street ('[The Gut](#)') in [Valletta](#), where brawls were not uncommon and the Naval Patrol ever present. A game of cricket was played, in "a stone quarry" and won by HMS *Wager* v HMS *Wakeful* and some of the officers and men were invited to a dance at the partly-bombed ERAs' Club.

After passing an Italian cruiser on sailing from Malta on 17 Aug 1944, HMS *Wager* spent six days during Ramadan at a buoy in Alexandria⁸⁴, Egypt, from 19 August; the depot ship HMS *Blenheim* (a former merchant ship) was in harbour and also two rather mutinous Greek destroyers. When [feluccas](#), with men selling wares and services of all sorts, would not leave the ship's side, some of the sailors saw them off with fire hoses. More runs ashore and parties, beaches, and nightlife! The sailors would tend to go ashore with their own shipmates but, wardroom officers, ashore in fewer numbers from any one ship would sometimes join up with officers from other 27DF ships.

HMS *Whelp* and HMS *Wessex* remained in Alex. Passing Port Said, a transit of the Suez Canal⁸⁵ followed for HMS *Wager*, her bridge awning spread – it was "hot and sticky," the ship's company ordered into tropical white uniform. The ship passed a long troop convoy, its being saluted at frequent intervals! The MO's journal records that there was other bizarre entertainment on the canal's shores. The destroyer passed Ismailia and Lake Timsah and a leave camp for British troops, familiar to some of the ship's company who had passed this way before. In the Bitter Lakes the ship passed the Italian battleships *Italia* and *Vittorio Veneto*⁸⁶ and a large Prisoner-of-War Camp. The temperature was 35°C and the ship anchored in order to pipe "hands to bathe" but the water was too salty and soon she weighed anchor and was underway. At Suez the ship anchored for the night, near an interned Italian destroyer, but no leave was granted. Next morning, both destroyers proceeded to Aden, the whole trip from Gibraltar being quite uneventful, other than the ship being 'escorted' by sharks on occasion.

HMS *Wager* and HMS *Wessex* arrived on 29 Aug 1944 at Aden⁸⁷, a British base at the barren south-western tip of the Arabian Peninsula, where the shore base HMS *Sheba* had been commissioned in 1940. She tied up alongside HMS

Wakeful. The next day, it was hoped to arrange a football match but all the pitches were fully booked. Some who went ashore were able to go moonlit bathing in a large shark-free pen.

After a couple of days, the two ships sailed early, first to Addu Atoll⁸⁸, arriving 7 Sep to take on fuel, their having been ordered to join an Escort Group hunting for a submarine just the other side of the Equator. At anchor in Addu Atoll, HMS *Wager* took the opportunity to hold its ["Crossing the Line" ceremony](#), Leading Seaman Longstaff playing King Neptune and Petty Officer Derrick as his wife. The 'Buffer' (Chief Boatswain's Mate) was the barber, the Gunnery Officer the clown, others playing the parts of the bears and Neptune's 'lovely' daughters. Most of the ship's company wore fancy dress. The 'ducking party' followed, everyone being ducked, regardless of whether they had 'Crossed the Line' before. A fun day!

The submarine hunt, which seems to have been a nugatory effort, both in time and fuel, continued the next day before the ships sailed for Colombo, arriving on the afternoon of 9 Sep. It was not uncommon to find no berth allocated in busy ports and HMS *Wager* spent a couple of hours weaving in and out of the assembled ships trying, as one officer described it, "to find a hole". Eventually, the ship dropped anchor, putting her stern onto the stern buoy of the aircraft carrier HMS *Victorious*⁸⁹.

'Postie'⁹⁰ went ashore and collected about fifteen bags of sea mail and air mail for the ship. This was the first mail to be received since the ship sailed UK on 26 Jul, some 46 days earlier. Most of the ship's company remained on board that evening, reading letters from home⁹¹. Some went by boat to watch a film on board HMS *Victorious* at 2100.

Radar stores were collected and the ship's Radar Officer had a meeting with the Fleet Radar Officer. This same day, before sailing, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser⁹² was piped on board in the forenoon and carried out an inspection. He was on his way out to the Pacific, having been appointed Commander-in-Chief British Pacific Fleet.

HMS *Wager*, now in company⁹³ with HMS *Whelp*⁹⁴, sailed early on 11 Sep 1944 around the coast of Ceylon, escorting the aircraft carrier HMS *Victorious*. She

had lost a couple of aircraft and HMS *Wager* was despatched to search for and pick up downed aircrew⁹⁵.

The two ships arrived late the next day at Trincomalee⁹⁶, a naval base on Ceylon's north-eastern coast, where was found the much-talked about Eastern Fleet. Trinco's large, lovely harbour is surrounded by jungle and was perfect for the Fleet's base (later it would be designated the East Indies Fleet). In the harbour were two British battleships, one aircraft carrier, three cruisers and destroyers from the N class (7DF), Q class (4DF) and R class (11DF) and many other ships comprising the Fleet Train.

Two own goals presented problems in Trincomalee. The previous month, mistakes made with the Admiralty Floating Dock⁹⁷ 23 (AFD23) while it was being raised with an old battleship in dock; AFD23 sank but HMS *Valiant* (1914) did not, although she was seriously damaged and out of service for the rest of the war. Also, one of HM Submarines had accidentally torpedoed a Fleet Oiler; the harbour water was rather oily for some time.

At first, the Fleet Canteen in Trinco became overwhelmed with British matelots enjoying a run ashore and beer had to be rationed! Hopefully, the beer situation improved during the ships' first five weeks at Trinco, and as well as R&R (Rest & Recreation), beach runs ashore and walks, and fun bartering with the young lads who sold fruit, harbour training was carried out.

HMS *Wager* had travelled well over 7,000 nautical miles from Greenock. It was some 6,000 nautical miles since her last boiler clean and she went alongside the Destroyer Depot Ship HMS *Woolwich* for a boiler clean, which took six days. Other maintenance was carried out, some with the help of depot ship experts, the most important being the successful rectification of problems with the elevation of Y turret.

For two days, some of the ship's company went to a rest camp at nearby Kinniya, on the coast not far from Trinco. Two officers went on 'sick leave' (the MO required an operation on board the Dutch hospital ship [my Tjitjalengka](#)), both convalescing at Diyatalawa, in the central highlands, a place that would be known to many British service personnel during the war.

A young officer wrote in his unpublished journal,

“We went to a head and stern buoy, spread awnings and keenly awaited for the developments. These soon appeared in the form of “gin scroungers.” The “Base Types,” poor devils, had been living on Indian Gin and Whiskey for some years so we were not surprised to find them both a little thirsty and somewhat mentally unbalanced – it’s amazing stuff Indian Gin! They arrived with the excuse of looking over the ship and seeing all the latest equipment. This, however, they said they would do the following morning and only managed to find their way to the wardroom. ...

“... We went ashore to look round and found a nice beach to bathe from. The surf was quite strong and we had plenty of fun. The ship’s water polo team was formed and I used to play centre half. We started off by playing the Australian Ns⁹⁸ who were very good. They gave us a sound idea how the game was played. We soon challenged the other “Ws” and as usual managed to “see them off.”

After the boiler clean the ship started a “working up” programme: gun shoots, bombardments, anti-submarine and torpedo firings, night encounters and flotilla exercises. This was completed successfully

Two fleet carriers and some cruisers went to Sumatra, in the Dutch East Indies, to prosecute an air strike. They were escorted by the R class destroyers of the 22nd Destroyer Flotilla. HMS Wager was considered not sufficiently worked up, and she stayed behind.

A junior officer wrote of the ship’s time in Trincomalee in his personal journal,

“Our shore going activities were very limited owing to conditions prevailing. The Officers’ Club at Trinco was sordid and as one had to go ashore in whites and it rained every evening at 2000 it seemed hardly worthwhile. Poker Die was a favourite game on board.

“In order to keep the sailors amused “Uckers”⁹⁹, whaler races, tug-of-war, pulling regattas, .22 rifle and revolver competitions and water sports were organised by the Sports Committee of which I was in charge.”

HMS *Wager* sailed, with the Eastern Fleet, 15 Oct 1944 for the Japanese-held Nicobar Islands (due east of Ceylon, to the NW of Sumatra). Operation *Millet*¹⁰⁰ was a diversionary operation from 17-20 October, the successful aim of which was to distract Japanese attention and forces away from the Pacific. It was rather dull, claimed one young officer, the “no Japanese showing any fight at all.” Again, HMS *Wager* fished out of ‘the drink’ a downed FAA pilot¹⁰¹. The Eastern Fleet returned to Trincomalee on 21 Oct 1944.

The following day, HMS *Wager* sailed for Colombo (reason unknown) and returned to Trincomalee on 24 Oct 1944. Again, for reasons not known, she sailed Trinco for Colombo, arriving and leaving on 31 Oct, sailing for Bombay, on the west coast of India, where she spent 2-4 Nov 1944. HMS *Wager* was at Addu Atoll on 8 Nov and returned to Colombo on 9 Nov, sailing the next day.

She arrived Bombay 12 Nov 1944 for repairs and a bottom scrape¹⁰². While at a buoy, in the preceding weeks, a small chip had been taken out of one of the ship’s propellers, causing considerable vibration. In his handwritten journal, a young officer wrote (edited),

“Everyone in FOIC’s offices¹⁰³ were terribly tired and most inefficient and had no idea whatsoever that there happened to be a war on. The Captain asked for some service transport and was told “My dear, that is quite impossible, I’m afraid my wife has the car doing her shopping.” That was the attitude throughout! Poona [Pune] – which is only a few miles away – certainly worked its influence right into Bombay.

“When we eventually got into dock (FOIC still thinking we were at anchor!) we had our first look around the shore. Shops full of everything. No apparent rationing of anything. Everything rather expensive. In the evening we visited the Harbour Bar at the Taj Mahal Palace, and the *most* exclusive Bombay Yacht Club. Here there were more butlers and servants than patrons! Plenty of food, Scotch, cigars etc. No ladies except on Saturday nights – this was Wednesday!

“The next day three [young officers] went to see the [Towers of Silence](#) with three VADs¹⁰⁴ on leave from Burma, who had promised to show us round the night before. We then went bathing and late-night dining and dancing.

“One evening the three of us went down Grant Road ... What squalor and filth. We returned and had a good bath.

“... we sailed, rather glad to leave this land of bloated Poona Colonels and starving Indians.”

HMS *Wager* left Bombay dockyard on 18 Nov and escorted the large troop transport USS *General A E Anderson*¹⁰⁵ for a destination a little south of the Equator. American signals were used in order to familiarise the ship for probable working with the Americans in the Pacific in the year ahead. After bidding the American troop transport farewell, HMS *Wager* returned to Trinco 21 Nov 1944.

Bombay left its mark on HMS *Wager* – “cockroaches, bed bugs, weevils in the flour, and VD in the troops.” Amoebic dysentery was a problem for some.

Captain D27, in HMS *Kempenfelt*, had now arrived in Trincomalee, his senior officers, such as the Flotilla Gunnery Officer, more up-to-date with operational matters than those staff in the depot ship or ashore in Ceylon. Thus, 27DF now comprised all seven ships¹⁰⁶, HMS *Kempenfelt*, HMS *Whelp*, HMS *Wakeful*, HMS *Wager*, HMS *Wessex*, HMS *Whirlwind* and HMS *Wrangler*.

The battleship HMS *Howe* (1940) had joined the Eastern Fleet at Trincomalee on 9 Aug 1944 and, as the first of the U class destroyers (25DF) were arriving, large scale fleet exercises were carried out in late Nov 1944, aimed at improving the operational efficiency of ships destined for the British Pacific Fleet. HMS *Howe* was the first flagship of the British Pacific Fleet, which was formed officially on 22 Nov 1944.

Most of the operations out of Trinco were not in sight of land for the ship's company, though on one occasion, in the distance, could be seen burning oilfields at Sabang, an island just off the northern tip of Sumatra.

On 4 Dec 1944, HMS *Wager* sailed Trinco and arrived Cochin, on the Malabar Coast of SW India, two days later. Cochin was a small town and proved to be an enjoyable run ashore. Seven-a-side rugby was played, bananas purchased, elephants' tusks were seen being carved for ivory products and one young

officer thought the locals much better off (with little begging, plenty of food and clothes), and cleaner, than those in Bombay.

She sailed 8 Dec, escorting the escort carrier HMS *Atheling* to the Equator – she was a ‘ferry carrier’¹⁰⁷. HMS *Wager* returned to Trinco on 13 Dec 1944.

Four days later, she set out on [Operation Robson](#)¹⁰⁸, another attack on an objective in Sumatra. This time the fleet, Force 67 with Rear Admiral Sir Philip Vian’s flag in the aircraft carrier HMS *Indomitable*, went closer to Singapore than ever before, attacking oil refineries at Pangkalan Brandan, in northern Sumatra on 20 Dec 1944. The operation had been largely thwarted by the weather and preparations were soon made for a second attempt – Operation *Lentil*.

A young officer wrote that the operation was, for HMS *Wager*, “rather dull.” This may have been because she and HMS *Whelp* were allocated to Force 69 for the operation, escorting the oiler RFA *Wave King*¹⁰⁹, an essential element of any such adventure but, inevitably, rather less glamorous. The other five destroyers of DF27 were part of the main body, Force 67.

In Trincomalee harbour by late on 22 Dec 1944, having done a lot of steaming, the ship went alongside the Destroyer Depot Ship HMS *Tyne*, which had just arrived from home, for boiler cleaning.

Christmas Eve, 1944, and young officers’ antics are clear from this detailed journal entry’

“On the evening of December 24th we had a memorable party. All the “Ws” were in harbour lying at head and stern buoys in a line in the order *Kempenfelt*, *Wrangler*, *Whelp*, *Wessex*, *Wakeful*. All the wardroom dressed up in fancy dress – amused ourselves with thunder flashes and set out in the whaler for *Wakeful* at the end of the line. We did not even attempt to sing carols! We got a grand reception, drank a lot of Beer and sallied forth in excellent form for *Wessex*. We broke into their dinner – awful scenes ensued – we finished off their dinner and practically all their beer as well! On to *Whelp* and *Wrangler* where similar scenes were enacted. Then at about 2400 – *Kempenfelt*. They had just finished seeing a Bing Crosby flick and needed livening up. We, by this time, were in great fettle and nothing could stop us. Most of the officers

including Captain (D) rushed away and put on fancy dress also. At about 0300 having wished everyone a Merry Christmas we thought that the only ship that had not been raided was – *Wager*. As nine of us stood on the lower boom, someone inboard slipped it and we all fell 20 feet into the drink! Two of us rowed the whaler home while the remainder swam back to the ship. Our ardour was by no means dampened and we saw Christmas morning in singing Carols in our own Wardroom.”

Both senior and junior ratings not part of the duty watch may have been granted shore leave. All those age twenty and more could draw their daily tot of rum (if they opted for ‘Grog’) but it was the only alcohol permitted. There were ways and means of saving a tot for special occasions – all outwith *King’s Regulations*, of course – and Jolly Jack was a past master at finding ways of breaking the rules! Sailors on board may have been granted a bottle of beer on Christmas Day.

The journal of the young officer continues,

“December 25th. Luckily I was OOD¹¹⁰. Everyone went mad. All the Destroyers were in harbour ... need more be said! Rounds of the messdecks were most successful until we caught up with the Petty Officers. They had much too much rum. We had all the POs and Chiefs [Chief Petty Officers] into the Wardroom for Beer and had Christmas Lunch at 1530. *Kempfenfelt* and *Wessex* invaded us in the evening but were practically drowned with hoses before they got in board. They departed much later! So ended the Best Christmas I have had in the Navy. Let’s hope it is the last.”

Operating at sea with Aircraft Carriers

1945 saw HMS *Wager* begin operations with aircraft carriers, sometimes as a plane guard, sometimes sent further afield to fish out of the sea a downed naval aviator. She would sometimes transfer a pilot from an aircraft carrier to a replenishment carrier or repair ship in order for him to pick up a new aircraft or a repaired aircraft. The War in the Pacific was essentially a naval air war and the aircraft carrier was key to success. Naval aviators were losing their lives in significant numbers whereas those in the ships were not, unless a carrier suffered an aircraft accident on the flight deck or a kamikaze attack. Mostly young men, for naval aviators beer and singing around the wardroom

piano was a way of letting their hair down at sea, saluting their messmates lost today and, perhaps, wondering who might not be around tomorrow.

The most famous of all Fleet Air Arm songs¹¹¹ was written by David Wright of 893 Naval Air Squadron embarked in the carrier HMS *Formidable* in 1942/43. The *A25 Song*¹¹² is unarguably the Fleet Air Arm's hymn and anthem; its first two verses give an idea of the attitude of young naval pilots, the brave young men with whom HMS *Wager* came into contact from time to time from late 1944 until the war's end:

I'll sing you a song about sailors who fly.
A *Formidable* Fleet Air Arm pilot am I.
I've seized up 'em all – Merlins, Cyclones and Taurus
And many's the time that I've chanted this chorus

CHORUS (between each verse)

*Cracking show, I'm alive
But I've still got to render my A25.*

They say in the Air Force a landing's okay
If the pilot gets out and can still walk away.
But in the Fleet Air Arm the prospects are dim
If the landing's piss poor and the pilot can't swim.

Some songs came from the Royal Navy's aircraft carrier war from late 1944 onwards, such as this first verse from *Eastern Fleet Song*:

They say that the Fleet came to Trincomalee,
Early in 'forty-four.
Heavily laden with men and with gen,
Bound for the Japanese war.
There's *Vic* and *Indom* and *Illustrious* too,
The *Indefat* came for the ride.
You get no promotion in the Indian Ocean.
We'd rather be back in the Clyde¹¹³.

The *National Anthem* is a sort of FAA Song too, as verse one includes the name of two aircraft carriers and a class destroyer¹¹⁴.

The boiler clean was completed on 28 Dec 1944. HMS *Wager* sailed Trincomalee on 1 Jan 1945, as part of Force 65, the newly-designated force led by Admiral Vian¹¹⁵ in his flagship, HMS *Indomitable*, on [Operation Lentil](#). Three aircraft carriers and their 92 naval aircraft, four cruisers and eight destroyers were involved. A full moon meant it was unwise to enter the Malacca Strait and the flying-off position was, consequently, further from the target, including crossing the 10,000-foot peaks of the Wihelmina Range. Fleet Air Arm¹¹⁶ (FAA) aircraft strafed airfields around Pangkalan Brandan and the town of Pangkalan Soe Soe attacked before attacks on the oil refineries. Both Operations were fairly successful, a rehearsal for what was to come later in January. The young officer recorded in his journal that Operation *Lentil* was “Another Fleet Air Arm party and very dull for the rest of the Fleet,” the right destroyers not have much to do other than escort the carriers – but such escorts were essential and bread-and-butter destroyer work. Force 65, including HMS *Wager*, returned to Trincomalee, arriving 7 Jan 1945.

HMS *Wager* – 1945 > British Pacific Fleet (BPF)

HMS *Wager* sailed Trincomalee for the last time on 16 Jan 1945 to be part of the screen for British carrier air strikes on the oil refineries at Palembang (almost due south of Singapore, in southern Sumatra). Exercises were carried out on passage.

Pendant numbers of most BPF ships changed in order to conform with US Navy practice and painting the new pendant number¹¹⁷ of D30 (replacing R98) on each side and stern was probably done in Trincomalee.

Designated Force 63 (TF63), again with Admiral Vian in his flagship, was virtually the British Pacific Fleet as it was first constituted (only the cruiser HMS *Ceylon* and HMS *Wessex* stayed behind to collect mail and radar spares, joining the fleet later). Four aircraft carriers had embarked the largest complement of aircraft fielded by the FAA so far in the war, some six types of naval aircraft – 238 all told. Force 63 also included the battleship HMS *King George V*, the 4th Cruiser Squadron (four cruisers) and four destroyers of DF25 and six of DF27 (HMS *Wrangler* was in Bombay for repairs from Jan to May

1945). There were also four tankers, later five, escorted by the destroyer HMS *Urchin*.

[Operation Meridian I](#) began on 20 Jan 1945 with the fleet refuelling at sea (RAS(L) it was termed, in later years) for much of the day. Force 63 then proceed towards the flying-off position, leaving HMS *Ceylon* and HMS *Urchin* to accompany the oilers (whose gear had been damaged by the destroyers in the gusting winds and troublesome swell).

With an inter-tropical front laying obstinately against the Sumatra coast – low cloud and persistent downpours – meant the first two air attacks were postponed. 24 Jan 1945 proved to be a fine day and, at 0615, Vian ordered the air strike to be launched. [Operation Meridian I](#) was the Pladjoe strike, the first of the two largest strikes ever undertaken by the FAA in the war and, indeed, to this day, eighty years on. Seven naval aircraft were lost and 25 damaged and naval aviators were lost too, but Pladjoe's output of aviation fuel was cut by half.

The BPF withdrew, the destroyer HMS *Ursa* detaching for Cocos Island, carrying despatches for transmission (as radio silence was maintained by Force 63 off the enemy coast). Fleet refuelling took place 26-27 Jan 1945 but it was slow, the Royal Navy way behind the US Navy in proficiency – hoses parted, erratic station-keeping by ships and a general lack of expertise in the evolution.

Not returning to Trincomalee was generally well received as the port was “not exactly a popular pleasure resort”! The BPF had been warned, though, that the lovely islands of the Pacific were far from being all ‘beer and skittles’.

[Operation Meridian II](#) was a strike on 29 Jan 1945 involving 66 naval aircraft from Force 63 on Soengei Gerong. The weather was very bad, with heavy rain-storms, squally winds and a low cloud ceiling; sometimes, visibility was under half a mile. Enemy aircraft attacked HMS *Wager* and other ships, nine Japanese torpedo bombers being shot down by ships of TF63, a junior officer in HMS *Wager* writing,

“The “A” Boys¹¹⁸ met with quite a bit of trouble – Balloon Barrage for the first time in the Eastern War, enemy fighter aircraft and “buckets of flak”. [Our aircraft] shot down about 100 planes altogether and lost only a few.”

While the oil refineries at Palembang had not been destroyed, production was at a standstill until the end of Mar 1945. 48 FAA aircraft were lost due to enemy action or to crash landing¹¹⁹.

Advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 2 Feb 1945

Issued by Commonwealth¹²⁰ Food Control

THE ROYAL NAVY IS NOT A MIRAGE

Within the horizon of our drought-stricken land there will soon be appearing, not a mirage, but a real and mighty naval force.

The British Pacific Fleet requires from Australia, by June 1945, £10,655,000 worth of food. And as part of our service to the British people and its unmatched navy, we will supply this food – in spite of the drought, in spite of our limited manpower; in spite of the fact that we are already meeting the heaviest food commitments in our history.

Producers and food workers cannot supply this food unaided. It can be supplied only with the co-operation of the entire civilian population. YOU can help by resolving now that

You will grow your own vegetables. Every home vegetable garden relieves the drain on the nation's food supplies.

You won't be a black market buyer – this is the meanest form of sabotage.

You won't waste food in any way.

YOU WON'T LET THE NAVY DOWN

The ships of TF63 refuelled from tankers of TF69, the latter returning to Trincomalee. TF63, including HMS *Wager*, proceeded some 1,800 nautical miles (nm) south to Western Australia, arriving Fremantle, the port of Perth, on 4 Feb 1945, where the destroyers mostly went straight alongside. HMS *Wager* was ordered to close HMS *Illustrious* and embark 20-30 injured men¹²¹,

and take them into the harbour, as the carrier was anchored outside. “They had been hurt when a 5.25” brick [shell] had hit her off Palembang,” writes the young officer,

“... we were greeted by civilians and service personnel, all looking after our needs. It was amazing. Fresh fruit, eggs and milk and meat were delivered to the ship. Games and books were brought on board and every man in the whole fleet received a bag of comforts from the Australian Comforts Fund. The Ladies of Perth and Fremantle only knew the day before that we were arriving and worked all night preparing for our arrival. It was a splendid reception and well appreciated by all.” No leave was granted, TF63 only staying a few hours, and that meant that invitations to young officers in HMS Wager to attend three dances ashore had to be declined!

The unexpected same-day departure of some of the ships of TF63 was clearly a disappointment to the locals – a disappointment, surely, for Jolly Jack too. After refuelling in Fremantle, two carriers and DF27 sailed at 1600, at economical steaming speed, some 2,140nm to Sydney, New South Wales, where the ships arrived 10 Feb 1945. A junior officer picks up the story,

“The usual night encounters and Kamikasi [Kamikaze] exercises were held as we were with Vian! He can never miss an opportunity to conduct exercises if he can’t get the real thing.

“The Great Australian Bight was very rough but as we turned the eastern corner of Australia the weather improved. The first part of the Fleet arrived off Sydney Heads. As we passed the boom news cameramen photographed us. HMS Wager, as usual, was the only destroyer to take on fuel oil and we then proceeded to Vacluse Pier. Here hundreds of people were keen to welcome us and invited us out to their houses. The spontaneous welcome for officers and men alike was wonderful.

“As this [officer’s journal] is more an account of naval activities rather than social ones, I will only say that I had the most wonderful fourteen days. Dances and picnics, wining and dining. The ship never stayed in one berth more than three days, much to our disgust. We left Vacluse and went to Garden Island¹²². From there into Cockatoo dock for a bottom scrape, new

ASDIC¹²³ dome, repair to one propeller screw and boiler cleaning. Then back to Garden Island and on up to Woolloomooloo.

“On 25 Feb we were Duty Destroyer and I was Officer of the Day. Our American Liaison Officer, Lieutenant (JG) Joe Frang USN, joined the ship. Sub Lieutenant (E) Brain¹²⁴ [?], for ever known as Junior¹²⁵, also joined before we sailed. Tom Butlin only recently promoted to 2½¹²⁶ left to join *Kempenfelt* as acting Commander!”

Soon after arrival in Sydney, a [photograph of two sailors](#) was published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 12 Feb 1945 with the caption “Bearded Ratings¹²⁷ of the Royal Navy enjoying their pots of beer at the Naafi¹²⁸ Fleet Canteen¹²⁹ in Goulburn Street, Sydney, on its opening night on Saturday. Under supervision of the Naval Patrol, sailors will be able to drink between 6pm and 9pm seven nights a week. British sailors who visited the canteen at the weekend voted it first class.”

Selected news story headlines from the *Sydney Morning Herald* – Feb 1945

There was no actual report of the arrival of the BPF in Sydney, security presumably the reason.

- Sailors’ Day Appeal – On Sailors’ Day (16 Feb) a Gala Carnival is to be held in Martin Place ... on 15 Feb Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser will broadcast (3 Feb)
- Women’s News – W.R.N.S. Officers report to Their Chief (*photo caption* – 3 Feb 1945)¹³⁰
- Special Unit to Arrange R.N. Mails (5 Feb)¹³¹
- Dockyards Hold-Up Threatened – Fight between two Unions (early Feb)
- The Menace of Wool Substitutes (early Feb)
- Peas and Beans again Cheaper (early Feb)
- English Amateur Cyclists now in the Royal Navy are anxious to ride in Sydney (early Feb)
- Strikes Threat to Meat and Ships
- New Carrier in Action (HMS *Indefatigable* off Sumatra – early Feb)
- R.A.N. crews for British Ships (early Feb)
- English Accent called “Treason” – Australia First Movement (early Feb)

- New Carrier in Pacific – photo of men in HMS *Indefatigable* (early Feb)
- Petrol Coupon Frauds (early Feb)
- Alleged Theft of Butter (early Feb)
- Australian Clothes for London Children (early Feb)
- Grocer Conducts Draw for Beer – beer quota problem (early Feb)
- At Sea aboard an American “Floating Airport” – feature article by William Marien, *SMH* War Correspondent in the Central Pacific (10 Feb)
- Salvage Unit for R.N. (12 Feb)¹³²
- Hosts sought for UK Men
- Women’s News – British Officers Entertained (*photo caption* – Dance Night at the Roosevelt Club)
- Women’s News – Helping with the Washing Up (*photo caption* – Marine R Hooper at the British Centre)
- Firemen’s Strike Extends (13 Feb)
- More Beds need for Naval Men – British Centre’s Appeal¹³³
- R.N. Men queue up at British Centre (*photo caption*)¹³⁴
- Naval Officers Missing in Bush + Naval Men Found
- Marine Fatally Injured
- Sailors Sleep in Marquee (*photo caption*)¹³⁵
- Sugar Coupons for R.N. Sailors – Many sailors have had food parcels packed and posted to their families in England courtesy of Australians donating their Ration Book coupons (22 Feb)

The British Pacific Fleet published its own newspaper, the [Pacific Post](#), which was [printed in Sydney](#). Copies would likely be sent by post to ships at sea, or perhaps collected from the main ports or bases – Sydney and Manus, perhaps Guam – and the aim was a distribution of one copy to every five men. Some ships produced their own newspaper or news-sheet but it is not known whether HMS *Wager* did so.

On 28 Feb 1945, the BPF, including HMS *Wager*, sailed for Manus but four days of fleet and aviation exercises were first undertaken before the Fleet proceeded to the Admiralty Islands¹³⁶. Manus, just 2° south of the Equator, was a huge US base built up over the preceding nine months, and was to be the base for the BPF Fleet Train¹³⁷ – the support ships. The buzz was that the base was worse than Trinco, a sort of Scapa Flow of the southern seas – and certainly very different to the “night lights and sweet music” of Sydney!

The BPF was led by Vice Admiral Sir Bernard Rawlings¹³⁸ (VABPF), flying his flag in the battleship HMS *King George V*¹³⁹ (aka KGV). Other warships in the BPF that sailed to Manus at this time included the battleship HMS *Howe*, four aircraft carriers – HMS *Illustrious*, HMS *Indefatigable*, HMS *Indomitable* and HMS *Victorious* – and five cruisers and sixteen destroyers (4DF, 25DF and 27DF).

It was very hot and humid for the ships' companies of warships old, and new, with little air conditioning and limited fridge space. 'Dress down' and no shaving was the standing order but, of course, not all 18 or 19-year-old men can grow much of a beard – a [Van Dyke beard](#) was popular!

From time to time the Captain would carry out formal rounds at sea. The First Lieutenant was in charge of keeping everything on board ship-shape and he would carry out evening rounds every day at sea (the Officer of the Day would do so when alongside in harbour or in a secure anchorage). Keeping the ship clean and tidy¹⁴⁰, with things properly stowed and 'squared away,' was very important, both for sailor's health and for operations at sea; if a ship is hit in action, or runs into an uncharted rock, or collides with another ship, and sea water is fast coming inboard, the last thing the damage control party wants to see is sailors' or ships' gear floating about!

At Manus, where the BPF arrived 7 Mar 1945 in the middle of a tropical rain storm, they waited for agreement with the Americans¹⁴¹ as to how and when the BPF was to be deployed.

At Manus, the destroyers were the last to enter harbour, and 27DF was the junior of the three flotillas, so HMS *Wager* was among the last of them. Among the last to take on fuel from alongside an oiler, HMS *Wager* then sailed seven miles to her designated anchorage; all this took place in steaming heat and occasional tropical downpours. "What a place!" wrote the young officer and he takes up the story thus,

"About 30 ships of the Fleet Train were in harbour. Almost every day for the next week we went to sea for day and night exercises. How absolutely sick to death we were of exercises! This of course meant the awful fuss of oiling each time on return to harbour!

“In our spare time we played water polo, sailed and had regattas. This all went to confirm the belief of our American Liaison Team that the British are mad!

“One or two unfortunate stories were being told that Admiral King [US Navy CNO] had threatened to resign if the BPF operated in Jap waters and the like. It had all been settled at Yalta but King had never been in favour of it. What were we to do, we who had come a mere 12,000 miles to fight the Japs? Exercises?

“After a lot of bickering however it was eventually decided that the BPF would cooperate and operate with the Yanks. One can only suppose that the friction was caused by the usual political blundering. How our destiny is governed by Whitehall – even to life or death!”

On 18 Mar 1945, the BPF sailed Manus for Ulithi Atoll¹⁴² – a large coral atoll, midway between Palau and Guam – close to the former Japanese naval base at Yap in the Caroline Islands. By 1945 it was a huge US naval base and some 647 ships, of all sizes, were at anchor at Ulithi Atoll in mid-March. As the BPF arrived on 20 Mar 1945, most of the US Task Force (TF58), with hundreds of landing craft, was sailing for Okinawa, in the Japanese Ryukyu Islands, some 150 miles north of the Tropic of Cancer.

The BPF – now designated Task Force 57 (TF57) by the US Navy – sailed Ulithi Atoll on 23 Mar 1945 for operations around Sakishima Gunto, islands 100 miles and more east of northern Formosa¹⁴³ at the southernmost end of the Japanese archipelago, in the Ryukyu Islands, and some 240 miles south-west of Okinawa. Sakishima Gunto was some 1,250 miles north-west of Ulithi Atoll. This meant long periods at sea, well out of sight of land, refuelling and stores replenishment from a still too small and sometimes unreliable Fleet Train¹⁴⁴. Indeed, HMS *Wager* and most ships of the BPF, were at sea for the next calendar month, no harbours or ports, no time alongside, no shore leave.

The name for the US assault on Okinawa was [Operation Iceberg](#) but two phases of the operation involving the BPF were known as *Iceberg One* and *Iceberg Two*.

Ships would go to Action Stations¹⁴⁵ just before sunrise and just before sunset, both times of day favoured by the Imperial Japanese Navy's kamikaze pilots for

their suicide attacks. A number of attacks were witnessed by men on the upper deck of HMS *Wager*, one aircraft coming out of the sun and flying over the ship not far above mast height before allied gunfire caused the plane to explode and fall into the sea in smithereens¹⁴⁶. During this time, a bigger enemy for the ship's company was boredom, as the ship steamed up and down, holding station on the aircraft carrier¹⁴⁷, and sailors reverted to a variety of traditional tasks¹⁴⁸ when off duty to keep occupied, such as leatherwork and mending clothes.

Shortage of stores and foodstuffs became a concern. In one junior ratings' mess, sailors were eating little other than tinned corned beef and tinned diced beetroot¹⁴⁹. There was further evidence that the Royal Navy's Fleet Train was unable to cope with the demands of the BPF with supplies of tinned pusser's, peas, dehydrated potatoes and carrots running out on board HMS *Wager*. Food is a vital part of a matelot's life at sea – long passages can be monotonous – and these shortages were unlikely to be good for morale. John Winton writes,

“Food in the ships was almost all dehydrated or tinned, and tended to be monotonous. A staple of the fleet's diet was dehydrated potato¹⁵⁰, served in a variety of ways – mashed, cubed, boiled, roast, fried; ...”

Water¹⁵¹ was important, both for the ship and for the sailors, especially in the Tropics. HMS *Wager* may have been the first destroyer to be fitted with a new 'gland steam evacuation system,' making the engine room slightly less hot. Water for drinking, cooking and washing came, of course, from the ship's own evaporators. Sometimes, there was one bucket of fresh water per messdeck per day – for all purposes!

John Winton captures the mood, in his excellent account *The Forgotten Fleet*,

“In spite of the heat and the tedium of the Sakishima Gunto operations, the fleet's morale had remained reasonably high. After years of serving in scratch forces, scraped together from the few ships available and often with no air cover, the men of the BPF had the comfortable knowledge that at last they were on the side of the big battalions ... Mail deliveries, so far from home, were regular and swift. ... On board there were film shows, deck hockey and tug-of-war on the upper deck, and in the evenings many ships ran their own

internal 'radio stations' over the ship's loudspeakers, with brains trusts, quizzes, sketches, record request programmes and other material devised and produced by the ship's company."

Ted Longshaw could not recall films at sea or ship's radio equipment (SRE) for the likes of quizzes, music and sailor-led off-watch amusement. The deck plans do show a cinema store but perhaps the limited availability of films meant few, if any, were shown in HMS *Wager*. Anyway, there was no large space for sailors other than the messdecks themselves and, as mentioned above, at sea, invariably there were off-watch sailors trying to sleep in the messdecks.

A typhoon was reported to be menacing the fuelling area, so instead of the intended air strikes, it was thought best to refuel, as some ships were running low. Ships withdrew to the replenishment area and fuelling was completed, without incident, by 1430 on 30 Mar 1945. While refuelling, an American Amphibious Support Squadron took the BPF's place, so keeping up pressure on the enemy. By early morning on 31 Mar the BPF was again on station and the cruiser HMS *Argonaut* and HMS *Wager* were detached on radar picket duties, guarding against possible enemy attempts to infiltrate British returning aircraft (Japanese bombers that might then carry out kamikaze attacks).

Time to return to operations off Sakishima Gunto and the young officer's journal for 1 Apr 1945,

"Air strikes were flown off – little opposition met and damage done to the airfields on the islands. During the next month or so this was to continue unabated. We would retire to the fuelling area, store ship, transfer passengers and aircrews, oil and return again to the forward area to continue the strikes.

"Most aircraft which came from Formosa to attack the Yanks on or around Okinawa landed at Sakishima. These it was the BPF's job to knock out. During one attack by Jap bombers *Ulster* was near missed and had to be towed by *Gambia* all the way to Leyte, some 800 miles. In other attacks by Kamikaze aircraft *Victorious* was very near missed by one and exploded another about 30 yards from the ship. We fired at several. The wing of another carried away one of *Illustrious*' radar aerials before crashing into the sea. Another landed on *Indefatigable* and the bits were swept away and flying resumed in 10 minutes. Had she been an American carrier without an armoured flight deck, she would

still be out of action some months later. This is surely the greatest constructional triumph over the Americans as regards shipbuilding this war. It paid high dividends in the Med and is again doing so now. ...

“The new [Japanese] “Baka” or piloted rocket propelled bomb was used against the Fleet on two occasions. Both met with dismal failure. This appears to be an excellent way to waste Jap money and manpower!

“The strain on the Commanding Officers of the destroyers was particularly severe. On one day we went alongside 10 ships, transferred 75 men and 5 tons of stores and 45 drop tanks. We were alongside ships from 7.30 in the morning till 1800 at night. The next day was a repeat performance ending with the transfer of two casualties to KGV. We then proceeded back into the operational area for four days of action stations¹⁵²!

“The mail organisation¹⁵³ was really very good indeed. I received a letter 18 days after it had been posted at home. When we retired to the fuelling area one of the “Bird” sloops used to do a DSB¹⁵⁴ trip with mail round the fleet. This was always the highlight of the day. The only disadvantage was that quantities of “Bumf” of the official nature also arrived, which found its way into the usual waste paper basket until we arrived in port and had time to deal with such stuff!

“At one period the food situation was pretty grim. No potatoes, vegetables, fresh meat or butter. Our “pet” oiler [Wave King](#) could not give us any so we asked *Swiftsure* for a little butter and KGV for some meat. They kindly gave us a little which lasted a few days and made a change from tinned “Steak and Kidney Pud” and Yank “Margarine” which, incidentally, is uneatable!

“There was no submarine activity either in the fuelling area or the operational area. The Japs are known to have quite a lot of subs but have no idea how to use them offensively. At the moment they use them to supply their many island outposts such as Yap. This is a stupid policy as these outposts are quite useless to Japan.

“On April 25 the Admiral announced that we would carry out “just one more strike” and Nimitz sent the usual “flannel” signal about “Never has so much etc etc”. We, with renewed pride returned, like heroes, to the forward area.

The Avenger pilots added more holes to the already pock-marked aerodromes and the fleet retired for Leyte in the Philippines.”

After returning to Leyte on 23 Apr 1945, one week was spent there. First, as always, the ships took on fuel and, then, HMS *Wager* went alongside the Victualling Store Carrier RFA *Fort Alabama*¹⁵⁵ where store ship was successfully completed, the ship’s company having worked hard to finish the job as quickly as possible. HMS *Wager* stayed alongside the store ship overnight, allowing officers and men to take advantage and acquire large quantities of ice!

An American supply ship was close to HMS *Wager* in the anchorage and the opportunity was taken to exchange commodities to the advantage of both wardrooms; the Americans traded “frozen turkeys and other foods in exchange for English cigarettes and booze.”

Captain (D) told the ship’s officers that HMS *Wager* was due a short refit. The young officer’s journal picks up the story,

“... and [said] that we would not be going with the fleet on the second part of the operation [*Iceberg Two*]. Of course we all wept bitterly at the thought of missing such a thrilling experience! We gave farewell parties to HMS *Tyne* and all the “Ws” and looked forward to a period of peace and quiet and rest in Melbourne.

“On arrival in Leyte we received a pile of sea mail. The Captain received a letter from a Sub Lieutenant Lee acknowledging his appointment¹⁵⁶ as GCO [Gunnery Control Officer] vice me! This amazed everyone from the Captain downwards who went to Captain (D) to see if he knew what it was all about. (D) said that as I had been put forward for a GCO* course¹⁵⁷ he supposed that I would be going to have to do it!”

Other ships of the BPF sailed for phase two of Operation *Iceberg* at Sakishima Gunto – but not HMS *Wager*. On May Day 1945, HMS *Whelp*, with HMS *Wager* in company, escorted the aircraft carrier [*HMS Illustrious*](#) south, first to Manus, arriving 8 May for re-fuelling and sailing the next day.

The young Gunnery Officer’s journal again,

“The news from Europe seemed very good and all over bar the shouting. We all felt very remote and far away from it all.

“We had some pilots¹⁵⁸ [naval aviators] on board for OOW experience and most amusing they were too. They said, like everyone else, that they would rather be in a carrier than a Destroyer. I disagree!”

Monopoly was a game of choice in the wardroom during this sea passage and the loaned Fleet Air Arm officers seemed always to win, the MO rather thinking they were cheating!

HMS *Wager* arrived at Manus at 0900 on 8 May 1945 – VE Day. The Gunnery Officer’s (‘Guns’) journal records,

“With the mail brought the news that I had got 6 month accelerated Promotion and was a Lieutenant from January 1st. We had drinks all round on that! Nothing however could make us very excited about V(E) day and we had an early lunch and went to sleep in the afternoon.

“In the evening *Illustrious* asked all *Whelp* and our wardroom over to dinner. There we had a bit of a party but nothing very hectic. We listened to Winnie and the King¹⁵⁹ and returned to the ship. I was picturing to myself what was happening at home and in London. That was no good! I went to bed instead.”

HMS *Wager* sailed Manus on 9 May and headed for Sydney. Guns’ journal,

“In order to give some demonstration of the fact that we had won the war in Europe *Illustrious* decided to have a “Joie de Feu” at 1830. On the dot of 1830 we all fired everything we had for 30 seconds. 4.7” guns, Bofors, Oerlikons, Rockets, Lanchesters, Rifles, Pistols and Very lights! It was a good sight and made a lovely noise! A little trawler, some 12 miles away, saw all the tracer and starshell and made a hurried “Important” signal to the Admiral of the area. “Have sighted heavy gunfire on a bearing 040° distance 12 miles. Am closing to investigate. Request further instructions”! We did not spoil his fun.”

The ships arrived in Sydney on 13 May. HMS *Illustrious* was returning to the UK for a refit after two full years of operations at sea, with numerous defects arising from battle damage and sheer hard work. HMS *Wager* was to proceed

to Devonport Dockyard in Auckland, New Zealand (not Melbourne as expected), for a refit and ship's company R&R (rest and recreation). HMS *Whelp* went to Melbourne for similar dockyard work from late May until Jul 1945.

Guns' journal records,

"... in Sydney. Here we hastily stored ship, embarked a good many radar bits and pieces for the refit and various odds and ends.

"In the afternoon No.1 (the First Lieutenant¹⁶⁰) and I settled down to a quiet game of tennis. I somehow managed to win. My tennis is still as lousy as ever. In the evening I celebrated my second stripe, VE Day, the successful operation, the coming refit, my relief¹⁶¹ etc. My head is still a little sore I think – but it was a very good party!"

HMS *Wager* sailed Sydney 15 May 1945 and Guns' journal continues.

"Sixteen Fleet Air Arm officers joined the ship for passage and we found out definitely that we were going to Auckland, New Zealand for our 6 week refit. Everyone was very glad about this as we all wanted very much to see NZ as we had heard so much about it. Martin Jones of course was delighted.

"We sailed at 1400 [on 15 May] and as we passed Sydney Heads the wind freshened into a gale and the sea became very rough. The Tasman Sea is an unpleasant stretch of water at the best of times but when it is rough ...!

"To make matters worse the additional 16 officers in the wardroom left no room at all for us watchkeepers and all of them, being used to big ships, were very sick indeed! It really was a nightmare trip but as we had the prospect of leave and 6 weeks rest, we did not mind.

"Nobby Clarke, Jerry Kent's relief, was left behind in Sydney to do an A/SCOs [Signal Communication Officer] course. This left me with my cabin to myself. It also meant that I had to look after Asdics as well."

HMS *Wager* arrived Auckland on 19 May 1945. While in dockyard hands, work was carried out to repair defects with the ships' main armament and, no

doubt, there was quite a long defect list to keep the New Zealander dockyard mateys busy. The ship's company lived on board the ship throughout the refit. Guns' journal gives an idea of how the R&R part of their time in NZ went,

"We arrived in Auckland at 1200. The weather was awful and it was very cold. We had been used to 100° or 90° and now it was about 50°F.

"We got rid of our passengers and they were not sorry to leave. Most of them had been away from home for about 3 years and were going to get 3 months leave.

"HMS *Wakeful*, which had been refitting in Auckland before us left behind notes on the place¹⁶². How the Dockyard worked, Social activities, Cinemas, Beer to drink, the attitude of the local Police to the British NO¹⁶³ (most encouraging!), How to hire a car, where to spend our leave etc etc. It really was most helpful and they must have taken a lot of trouble over it. We were told by Commander "Skipper" Keene RNR that the Royal NZ Yacht Squadron was a good place to "start the evening at"! This we found to be a most excellent place.

"As I said before this is not a journal of my shore going activities. Let it suffice to say that I have never enjoyed myself so much as I did during the 8 weeks we had in Auckland.

"Although we were not tired of the action we had seen "up in the Islands", we had been "on the go" for a good many months without much rest. Here we settled down to finding good friends – and having above all a "damned good time". Dick, of course, was the ideal friend. His ideas were exactly the same as mine. He liked his beer and so did I. He wanted to spend his leave on a sheep farm *et moi aussi*.

"Everything that we could want was to be found in Auckland. Wine women and song. We went to the races at Ellerslie and won some money which was useful. We went to Dances, Cocktail Parties, House Parties, Dinner Parties etc etc. This list could go on for Ever.

"For leave, Dick and I went down to a farm on the main Auckland-Rotorua line – a small 250 acre farm at a place called Te Kauwhata near Rangirini. Here

Racehorses were trained and there were about 800 sheep and 200 cattle. One day we drove down through Huntley and Hamilton to Te Awamutu to a Mrs Allan Kay. She also owned Racehorses and had a large farm. We watched a New Zealand Hunt (no foxes, only hares), went to the Hunt Ball and returned about 60 miles to our farm.

“Eight weeks soon flew by and it was almost “time to say good bye”. When we first arrived, I got a letter from [Sub Lieutenant] Lee saying that he had arrived in Sydney but had unfortunately got pneumonia and was in hospital. Later I received another letter saying that he was on the way over in Wessex which was also coming to refit¹⁶⁴ in Auckland. One week before we left he arrived! A great day! I was to stay in *Wager* – hand over to Lee and leave the ship in Sydney¹⁶⁵.”

Not everyone was happy with the offers of entertainment in New Zealand. Ted Longshaw¹⁶⁶ recalled that he and a chum went to Rotorua to stay on a farm. It was too quiet for these young men and they yearned for the lights of Auckland, for a proper run ashore. After two days, by means of a telephone trick, pretending that he had answered a call from the ship, they said they were being recalled and returned to the ship and city night life.

She was at sea for post-refit trials on 12 Jul and, the next day, refit and trials completed, HMS *Wager* proceeded west to join the BPF, arriving Sydney 17 Jul 1945. Guns' journal takes up the story,

“My birthday. One year ago I was leaving home¹⁶⁷. Today had to be the day chosen for us to leave Auckland! Sad in some ways but also joyful, we waved “Good bye” to Auckland and all it stood for. What a wonderful place New Zealand is. I would love to return ... one day.

“We had three passengers with us this trip: an Engineer Rear Admiral, Lieutenant Brachi, GCO of Wessex, whose wife was arriving in the *Stirling Castle*¹⁶⁸ from England any day and a Ping Sub¹⁶⁹ from *Kempenfelt*.

“As before, the trip was very rough and most people felt very dejected and depressed leaving our “second” home. Five ratings had got married and about 10 more engaged in the 8 weeks! All the officers managed to escape by the skin of their teeth! I think Dick probably had the nearest squeak! Names such

as Barbara, Daphne, Sheila, Faith, Judy, Ray, Olive and Janet and of course the other bunch, Billy, Ann and Joan, will always be associated with Auckland!

“The day before we arrived in Sydney we passed the *Rangitata*¹⁷⁰. She signalled us and said that she was “Bound for UK”. I therefore knew I had missed a troop ship and that another would not be going for at least a month. I did not like the thought of spending a month in Sydney, just hanging about “gash”¹⁷¹ as they say!”

Guns’ continues,

“We arrived in Sydney at 1030. I went ashore immediately to find out what was going to be done with me. No one in CinC’s offices knew anything but the FGO [Fleet Gunnery Officer] said he would call up Melbourne and try to find out all the “gen”. I returned to *Wager* a little disappointed but hopeful.

“She in the meantime having oiled had shifted berth to Garden Island alongside *Quilliam* and *Whelp*. I found out from No.1 of *Quilliam*¹⁷², who came over to have tea with Dick that she had been badly smashed up in a collision, had a false Yankee bow and was going home on July 19th. Would he like to have me? Yes, very much: he was one short of a watchkeeper.

“Things are not quite so easy as that in the Royal Navy. These things have to be done through the “usual service channels!” where one usually finds many obstructions placed in the way of the unwary!

Guns’ journal for 18 Jul 1945 continues,

“At crack o’ dawn I departed to find the “onward passage officer.” By 1000 he was tracked down, and incidentally screwed down. Yes, he thought that he might be able to manage it. It all depended on Melbourne. VA(Q) [Vice Admiral (Administration)] was duly called up and he gave the OK. I was to join this evening – I fled before he could change his mind!

“I arrived back in the ship before noon and spread the good news. Everyone was terribly sorry to hear I was departing so soon. As promised I made my way, carefully, down to the Chief and Petty Officers’ messes. There I said goodbye accompanied by their “tots”.

In the evening a “farewell” party had been arranged for me at “Junior’s” home. We danced, sang songs and had a grand evening and I was very sad to think that it was the last one I would spend with “the Boys”. They are such a good crowd. The party consisted of John, Dick, Chief, Doc, Lee, Murdo and of course “Junior”¹⁷³.

“All my gear had been packed and taken over to *Quilliam* where I have a nice double cabin all to myself. There are only two ship’s officers. All the rest are, like myself, passengers. I have no duties to perform except keep a watch at sea which helps to pass the time.

On returning from “Junior’s” party which was in [Mosman](#) across the Bridge, I spent the night in *Quilliam*, as she was alongside *Wager*”.

The last entry relevant to HMS *Wager* in Guns’ journal was for 19 Jul 1945 – but many thanks to him,

“At 0830 I went across to *Wager* to say goodbye to Basher [Watkin]. He was terribly nice and gave me my “flimsy”¹⁷⁴ and a personal note, which I treasure.

“I then had the unpleasant job of saying goodbye to the officers. Dick came down to the gangway to see me off and I hated saying goodbye to such a great friend.

“As we [HMS *Quilliam*¹⁷⁵] “let go” from *Wager* all the officers and a good bit of the ship’s company were on deck and waved “good bye.” This was all nearly too much for me and it was a very sad moment when I said “Farewell” to *Wager* all the good memories I have and a wonderful ship.”

HMS *Wager* sailed Sydney 22 Jul 1945 and arrived Jervis Bay¹⁷⁶ the next day. After four days of working up to operational standard, she sailed and returned to Sydney on 28 Jul. She then departed Sydney on 31 Jul and arrived Manus, in the Admiralty Islands, on 5 Aug 1945 (where she had last been three months earlier).

There was some surprise on board when, on 6 Aug 1945, the ship met up with the battleship HMS *Duke of York*, now flagship of the BPF, first refuelling from

her on the battleship's port side, with HMS *Whelp* to starboard. The two destroyers were to escort Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser's flagship to Guam, where the C-in-C was to confer on Admiral Chester Nimitz¹⁷⁷ USN an honorary knighthood.

On 6 Aug 1945 the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and, on 9 August, the day the ships arrived at Guam, the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. That day, Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray RCNVR, attacked shipping in Onagawa Wan, his bravery earning a Victoria Cross¹⁷⁸,

In Guam, libertymen were taken across the island to the [Gab Gab Bowl](#) to see the US Army show *This is the Army*¹⁷⁹, with its all-male cast. There were large numbers of US bombers – the [B-29 Super Fortress](#) – lined up wing tip to wing tip, in preparation for the expected final assault in Japan.

The ship sailed Guam on 13 Aug 1945, probably at economical steaming speed (around 18 knots), gathering speed after she was ordered to join other Allied ships in Tokyo Bay, the 'buzz' being that the Japanese were likely to surrender imminently (Japan did so, on 15 Aug 1945 – now known as VJ Day). HMS *Wager* and other ships joined American Admiral 'Bull' Halsey's Third Fleet some three hundred miles south of Tokyo.

By the time of VJ Day, the British Pacific Fleet consisted of 182,560 men (and some 10,000 WRNS and nurses) serving in four main shore establishments, in Mobile Operational Naval Air Bases ([MONABs](#)) and elsewhere, and in some 181 warships and 92 ships in the Fleet Train – a total of 273 ships – the largest British fleet under the command of one C-in-C and, arguably, the most powerful (bar nuclear-armed submarines and ships):

- 5 large aircraft carriers
- 4 light fleet carriers
- 2 aircraft maintenance carriers
- 8 escort carriers
- 4 battleships
- 10 cruisers
- 3 fast minelayers
- 2 destroyer depot ships
- 40 destroyers

- 31 sloops and frigates
- 3 submarine depot ships
- 29 submarines
- 33 fleet minesweepers and other minesweepers
- 2 landing ships
- 5 others – danlayers, aircraft target ship, boom carriers
- 92 ships – Fleet Train
- 2 Admiralty Floating Docks (AFDs)
- Over 750 naval aircraft

Only one British warship was lost to a kamikaze¹⁸⁰ attack, the minesweeper HMS *Vestal* being so seriously damaged on 26 Jul 1945 that she was later scuttled; fifteen men were killed. She was the last Royal Navy warship to be lost in the Second World War. Other ships, particularly aircraft carriers, were badly damaged by kamikaze attacks and men were killed, but no other ships were lost.

The highest number of British losses and casualties was among the submarines, several boats being lost with all hands. The other losses in significant numbers were naval aircraft and some of their aircrew, some of whom were taken prisoner by the Japanese.

The East Indies Fleet, on 15 Aug 1945, had almost as many ships. I have not investigated losses in that fleet.

“The United States Navy and Marine Corps were chiefly responsible for the defeat of Japan. ...

“The outstanding personality of the Japanese War was Nimitz, who directed the US Navy’s Pacific campaign with cool confidence and judgement, often displaying brilliance, especially in the exploitation of intelligence. Spruance showed himself the ablest fleet commander at sea.

“On the British side Cunningham, Somerville and Horton were outstanding naval officers. ...”.

From the final chapter of *All Hell Let Loose* by Sir Max Hastings

HMS Wager – Aftermath of war

HMS *Whelp* and HMS *Wager*, again escorting the flagship, HMS *Duke of York*, joined US naval forces off the coast of Japan on 16 Aug 1945, the day after Japan surrendered. The ships arrived in Sagami Bay, 25 miles south-west of Tokyo, on 27 Aug and were in Tokyo Bay the next day.

Stoker Elwick writes, “HMS *Wager* was the duty destroyer and had to go into Tokyo harbour and patrol up and down. The first thing to notice was the brilliant paintwork of the hospital ship¹⁸¹ lying alongside. The rest of the harbour was a complete and utter shambles. Large sections of jetty timber floating about had to be prised away from the ship’s side in case they were booby traps. Half-built ships had been sent down the slipways and were half-submerged in the water.

“One of the prisoners-of-war¹⁸² taken onto the hospital ship passed away and we had to supply the firing squad for the funeral, and six Japanese officers had to carry the coffin, draped in the Union Jack, to the graveside.”

After the surrender of Japan, the formal signing of the [Instrument of Surrender](#) took place on the quarterdeck of the battleship USS *Missouri*, just after 0900 on Sunday 2 Sep 1945. General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, signed and Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz signed for the USA, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser for the UK, along with signatories of six other Allied Powers and, of course, representatives of the Empire of Japan. Some 250 [ships were present](#), including 39 USN destroyers, three RAN destroyers and nine Royal Navy destroyers, including at least three from 27DF – HMS *Whelp*, HMS *Wager* and the recently-arrived HMS *Wizard*.

HMS *Wager* did not stay long in Tokyo, but there was time for a water polo match v HMS *Whelp* and other recreation on board – no shore leave, of course. The opportunity was taken to ‘[paint ship](#)’ on 1 Sep – sailors over the side, painting the ship’s hull and it is likely that this was when the pendant number D30 was painted over, HMS *Wager* reverting to her original pendant number of R98. Control of the BPF had chopped from the USN to the Royal Navy in the preceding two weeks.

She sailed from Tokyo Bay on 9 or 10 Sep, with HMS *Whelp*, the pair escorting Admiral Fraser in his flagship, calling briefly at Okinawa on 12 Sep 1945.

Ted Elwick again, “Ah, there goes “Special sea-dutymen to your stations. Hands to stations for leaving harbour.” I have to go down to the engine room now to record the engine movements. The Engineer Officer will be standing beside me, checking that the telegraphs transmitted from the bridge are complied with correctly. The Chief Engine Room Artificer (CERA) will also be present.”

The ships were to proceed with all despatch to join Rear Admiral Cecil Harcourt’s force, TG 111.2, his flag in the cruiser HMS *Swiftsure*, which was to re-occupy Hong Kong¹⁸³.

Just before HMS *Wager* arrived Hong Kong, she was ordered to search for survivors from a Dakota military transport aircraft that had crashed into the sea; HMS *Ursa* successfully picked up survivors. HMS *Wager* arrived at the colony on 16 Sep 1945, after a passage of some 1,650 nautical miles from Tokyo. Admiral Harcourt received the formal surrender of Japan¹⁸⁴ at Government House on 16 Sep 1945 and was *de facto* Governor of Hong Kong until May 1946. “Splice the Mainbrace¹⁸⁵” was ordered by the admiral.

Elwick again, “During our stay there, we had two duties to perform. Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser had to go up to Canton¹⁸⁶ for a meeting with Generalissimo [Chiang Kai Chek](#) and he chose *Wager* to take him as far as we could; two RAF air sea rescue vessels followed behind to take him the final part of the journey, [on 20 Sep 1945]. The river¹⁸⁷ up to Canton is very shallow. The water is a muddy yellow colour and at times we lost the river bank on either side in the heat haze.

“On the forecastle, a seaman was taking soundings and, when the skipper decided it was not safe for us to proceed further, the Admiral went onto one of the small craft and continued his journey. We waited for him to come back, and then we returned to Hong Kong [on 21 Sep 1945].”

On 24 Sep 1945, on receipt of a Typhoon warning, HMS *Wager* put to the open sea for safety, returning to harbour the next day as the Typhoon missed the colony. Four days later, some 15% of the ship’s company left the ship to

return early to the UK, by troopship, no doubt for a variety of reasons – compassionate leave, training courses and some so that they would meet the ship on her return and take over as Duty Watch in Portsmouth, thus allowing others to go on leave without delay.

On 3 Oct 1945, HMS *Wager* sailed on an anti-piracy patrol along the south coast of China. She returned the next day and picked up aviation fuel to take that day 170 miles east to Swatow (Shantou), where she fuelled a [Supermarine Sea Otter](#), a flying boat. The ship was at anchor overnight and sailed Tong Sang harbour for Hong Kong on 6 Oct 1945, arriving later that day.

Len Ackroyd's diary notes that on 9 Oct there were Chinese celebrations ashore with fire crackers and more; this was probably the Mid-Autumn Festival¹⁸⁸.

Elwick then refers to what was perhaps the most important requirement in the remaining months of 1945 in the Pacific region, that of recovering prisoners-of-war and dealing, where possible, with displaced peoples. HMS *Wager* sailed Hong Kong on 18 Oct 1945. He writes,

“Priority was given to collecting ex-prisoners-of-war and internees and getting them on their way home. Therefore, our second duty was to go with the light fleet carrier HMS *Unicorn*¹⁸⁹ down to Hai Phong, in French Indo-China¹⁹⁰, to collect [Indian] prisoners-of-war¹⁹¹, taking them to the aircraft carrier HMS *Venerable* nearby [HMS *Wager* arrived 20 Oct 1945, sailing the following day]. Now, the harbour there is shallow and the carrier had to lay off, so we went in as far as we could then an LCT¹⁹² from the carrier ferried them out to us, and they sat on the upper deck. We asked the first ones on board if there were any British among them and the answer was no; the British hadn't been able to live on the handful of rice a day which was the ration, and only the Asians had survived. Our lads handed round cigarettes. Another attempt to be hospitable was slices of bread and butter with strawberry jam, which was immediately stopped by Surgeon Lt. Gayman, our ship's doctor, who told the lads that such rich food would kill the lot. The doctor on the *Unicorn* would arrange their diet. When they had all got on board, we took them out and transferred them to the carrier which proceeded to Shanghai, while we returned on our own to Hong Kong.”

HMS *Wager* arrived in Hong Kong 22 Oct 1945. Perhaps the wardroom was able to mark the 140th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar (21 Oct) with a Trafalgar Night Dinner¹⁹³ on board around that time – the night is the most important dinner of the year in wardrooms at sea and ashore.

Len Ackroyd mentions that a concert was held on board the destroyer on 23 Oct 1945. On 27 Oct HMS *Wager* sailed for another anti-piracy patrol, rather longer this time, the ship returning on 1 Nov 1945 to Hong Kong, where she anchored in Junk Bay.

On 2 Nov the 27DF held a regatta, each ship crewing the ship's whaler¹⁹⁴ and racing against each other – HMS *Wager*'s whaler's crew won!

The time after any surrender can be an uneasy peace, with concerns about the trustworthiness of the former enemy, wondering whether rogue elements might start the fight anew. Eighty years ago, in seas as vast as the Pacific Ocean, a fast destroyer was often an admiral's ship of choice, so, time standing by, awaiting orders that might never come, was an essential duty. Hong Kong may not have been such a bad place to be waiting! HMS *Wager* left Hong Kong for the last time on 4 Nov 1945 and set course for Darwin, in the Northern Territory of Australia.

HMS *Wager* – A long passage home to the UK

It was at this time that the 27th Destroyer Flotilla (27DF) sailed together, probably the first time that Captain D – Captain E G MacGregor DSO RN, in HMS *Kempenfelt* – had sailed with most, if not all, of his Flotilla in close company. 27DF began the long passage south, some 2,308 nautical miles, to Darwin, in the Northern Territory of Australia – the first leg of a long passage to England.

Elwick adds some fun to the story, “For this part of our journey home, the flotilla steamed line abreast. Every morning, I had to go aft to collect a piece of paper from the chief stoker with the figure of the fuel remaining written on it, and take it up and hand it to the skipper on the bridge at 8am. This gave me something to do. One morning I arrived on the bridge to find the skipper almost tearing his beard out. I asked the duty signalman what was wrong with the old man, and he said he had just been ruled wrong in the quiz. Now I

must explain that they were holding a quiz, with D27 on the flotilla leader, HMS *Kempenfelt*, giving out the questions over the short-wave radio, and the destroyers had to give the answers by flag hoisting. This gave the bunting tossers¹⁹⁵ something to do. I asked the signalman what was the question and he said, “What did Cleopatra die of?” The skipper said “Snake bite—run up snake bite,” so that was done. He was ruled wrong because Cleopatra was stung by an asp. An asp doesn’t bite; it stings. The CO was not a happy man.”

HMS *Whirlwind* detached from 27DF on 15 Nov in order to call at Brisbane. She arrived in Sydney two days after HMS *Wager*.

At Darwin, 27DF refuelled and then sailed, after a day, southwards, past the Great Barrier Reef to Sydney, a passage of some 2,500 nm. She arrived in Sydney on 17 Nov 1945, and HMS *Kempenfelt* tied up alongside the submarine depot ship HMS *Maidstone*, with HMS *Wager* outboard of the Leader and another destroyer outboard of her.

On the evening of Thursday 29 Nov 1945, an accident occurred on board HMS *Kempenfelt*, described here by Elwick,

“It was early evening and I was getting ready to go ashore when there was a terrific explosion. The *Wager* lifted up and dropped down again. I quickly put on my boiler suit and rushed up on to the upper deck. There were flames and smoke coming from *Kempenfelt*’s bofors gun deck. Commander Butlin, my former EO, was crouched down spraying a hose on the forward torpedo war heads. I ran over to him and he said, “Here Elwick, keep these other war heads cool,” and handed me the hose pipe. What had happened was the starboard torpedo had launched itself in the parked position, smashed into the bofors gun deck, the war head split, the 400lb of TNT got ignited by the electrical sparks and it sent the torpedo body back, knocking the chocks off the end of the tube and sending it forward through the engine room cowling, through the boiler room cowling, through three small offices and the end where the propeller had been was stuck in the funnel. Again the *Wager* was lucky—it happened to the ship next door.”

The story was covered in the press the next day. The [newspaper reported](#) that “HMS *Kempenfelt*¹⁹⁶, one of several destroyers loading gift food for Britain,

was due to sail next week, but its departure will now be delayed considerably". Uncertain, but perhaps one rating was killed.

That same evening, many of the ship's company of HMS *Wager* were ashore for a ship's dance.

HMS *Wager* sailed from Sydney for the last time on 1 Dec 1945, in company with HMS *Whirlwind*, both escorting HMS *Duke of York*. The ships called first at Fremantle where, in one day in the port on 7 Dec, she took on fuel, water and provisions for the passage home to the UK. Four days later she spent five hours at Christmas Island, 250 miles south of the mouth of the Sunda Strait, between Java and Sumatra.

Stoker Elwick's journal has been very helpful and he deserves a salute as I copy this from the last page of his story,

"On the way home, escorting HMS *Duke of York*, they picked up a faint radio signal, apparently from Christmas Island, calling for medical supplies and food. Both *Wager* and *Whelp* got the order to swing round in a bay and drop a depth charge each. Out came the buckets with holes in the bottom and ropes on the handles, which was normal routine after depth charge trials, as we doubled back to scoop up the dead and stunned fish. Getting back to the spot, there were only a few sprat-size fish there, no fish for the islanders to catch."

Thus, we learn that the battleship HMS *Duke of York*, the 27DF Half Leader HMS *Whelp* and HMS *Wager*, sailed from Australia in company (whither HMS *Whirlwind*?). The group arrived Singapore¹⁹⁷ at 0630 on 14 Dec 1945, having passed through the Sunda Strait and the Gaspar Strait. HMS *Duke of York* remained at Singapore and the destroyers sailed at 1700. A transit of the Strait of Malacca, between Malaya and Sumatra, followed their departure from Singapore and, heading west through the Indian Ocean, the ships passed near the Nicobar Islands on passage to Colombo, capital of Ceylon, where they arrived 19 Dec 1945.

They sailed two days later and celebrated Christmas at sea (Christmas 1944 was spent in Trincomalee). Hopefully, foodstuffs embarked in Sydney, Fremantle and Singapore provided for Christmas dinner with, at least, some of the trimmings.

The ships arrived Aden on Boxing Day and sailed the following day for Port Suez, a transit of the Suez Canal on the last day of 1945 and into the Mediterranean Sea at Port Said, where she arrived overnight. New Year's Day 1946 was spent at Port Said, the ship in the port long enough for, hopefully, both watches to be granted leave, to go ashore for a drink and buy "rabbits"¹⁹⁸ for home.

The ships arrived Gibraltar 8 Jan 1946 and stayed two days. They arrived Portsmouth, the first time HMS *Wager* had called there, at 1000 on 14 Jan 1946, flying her paying-off pennant¹⁹⁹. Alongside in the dockyard, most of the officers and men travelled to all parts of the UK to see their families²⁰⁰. A few remained on board, the duty watch. Over the weeks to come, hands available would be engaged in the start of de-storing and closing down the ship administratively, preparing for going into reserve. Night leave would be granted to those not on watch, a chance for some to have a run ashore in Pompey's Queen Street and Commercial Road for the very first time!

After a while alongside, the ship formally paid off on 1 May 1946 into the 'B' Reserve Fleet in Porchester Creek. The last line of Stoker Elwick's journal reads "I suppose it was fitting that *Wager* and *Whelp* should be tied up alongside each other."



The British Pacific Fleet – an Assessment

John Winton begins the final chapter of his excellent book, *The Forgotten Fleet*,

"In cold statistics, the total operational achievement of the surface ships of the BPF was thirty-six air strike-days against the enemy and four bombardments of enemy territory." 28 of those 36 days involved HMS *Wager* in one way or another. Winton continues,

"Even the most eager British historian could never claim that the British Pacific Fleet played anything more than an ancillary part in the war at sea in the Pacific, although its actions won the admiration and respect of the United States Navy and, incidentally, set the pattern for the shape of the Royal Navy

after the war. However, when the war against Japan came to its sudden end, the fleet was the only large, mobile Commonwealth force which was instantly available to safeguard Commonwealth interests in the Pacific. It could be said that the BPF's most valuable services were not military, but political and humanitarian, and were rendered after VJ Day."

One must also remember that the BPF could only come together after Churchill was certain that Germany was broken and would be defeated; until then, the US and UK were agreed that Germany must be defeated first.

Also, it is essential to think in terms of the times of 1944 and 1945. Those who knew nothing of Project *Manhattan* – and that was everyone bar a very few – expected the war against Japan not to end in 1945, but to continue into 1946, some thought 1947. The Admiralty had plans for a significant enlargement of the British Pacific Fleet from mid-1945 (witness the shipbuilding programme, and the orders cancelled, or slowed down, from Aug 1945 onwards). From a slow and difficult start, in late 1944, the BPF would have become a more important asset in the Pacific War, one year later and beyond. It's a good thing, for most concerned, that the anticipated one million deaths that the Allied Powers feared, in a final push towards and on to the main islands of Japan, was not required.



HMS Wager – the Ship's Company

My father, AB (LTO) Walter May (1906-1982), was one of the oldest men on board, age 39 on 10 Jul 1945. The Captain, 'Basher' Watkin, was born 1911, the First Lieutenant, [Richard Trowbridge](#), in 1920. The average age of a ship's company in peacetime was around 21 but, with wartime sailors being [conscripted](#) up to the age of 51, I expect the average age might have been a little higher by 1944/45.

The only known casualty during the commission was the drowning off Ceylon of AB (R) Smith; the circumstances are not known.

Many of the young officers and men on board were born in the years 1922-1926. Few who served in HMS *Wager* will be alive today, at the time of VJ Day 80²⁰¹ (15 Aug 2025), but there may be a centenarian somewhere!²⁰²

As with so many who served in the Royal Navy, life in a 'blue suit' changed Jolly Jack's life for ever and this was especially true of those who served in the Second World War. Signalman Ted Longshaw²⁰³ was emphatic that his four years in the wartime Navy had made him "worldly wise and responsible" as a result of his Hostilities Only service.

There was no room for any attitude of "that's not my job" – sailors muck in (well, in truth, they are 'detailed off!'). Sailors were not employed for just their trade, they would be part of a fire party, part of a first aid party, one of the hands storing ship or over the side painting ship, or hauling on ropes on the upper deck during a [jackstay transfer](#)²⁰⁴ or while lowering and [hoisting the ship's whaler](#). For example, Signalman Ted Longshaw would stand a watch as quartermaster on the ship's wheel at sea or as a boat coxswain when at anchor or a buoy and, when alongside, his duty was manning the ship's one shore telephone line.

Here is a guesstimate of the [Scheme of Complement](#) – the ranks and ratings of the 186-190 Officers and Men on board.

HMS *Wager* – Battle Honours

NB: there is differing information in two of the principal books published about Battle Honours awarded to Royal Navy ships. A review was conducted c.1970 into Battle Honours awarded for the Second World War, so Ben Warlow's book²⁰⁵ is likely to be authoritative; doubtless Naval Historical Branch will have the definitive answer.

With no Battle Honours to the name, HMS *Wager* would have had no need for a battle honours board for much of the war. However, she was definitely awarded the Battle Honour OKINAWA 1945 and, perhaps, one wonders whether the official announcement of the award was made in time for the ship's Chippy – the Shipwright Artificer – to have made a battle honours board before she paid off?

Ben Warlow states that HMS *Wager* was awarded the Battle Honour EAST INDIES 1944, as were HM Ships *Wakeful*, *Whelp* and *Wessex*. This might be because of the aforementioned review of c.1970. Even so, it is odd that two of 27DF were awarded the Battle Honour NORWAY 1940 when HMS *Wager*, perhaps others of the Flotilla, were not – HMS *Wager* seems to qualify too.

HMS *Wizard*, alone of the eight destroyers of 27DF, did not receive the battle honour OKINAWA 1945, as she was engaged in no wartime operations.

Battle Honours for other ships of 27DF require more investigation.

HMS *Wager* – Medals for the Ship's Company

No honours or gallantry medals were awarded to the officers and men of HMS *Wager*. She played her part in the war and did it well but was part of a greater adventure, that of the Allied Nations defeating two principal enemies, and that was doubtless sufficient reward for most. I trust that the ship's company were able to reflect, in later years, on their endeavours with pride and fond memories, although tinged with a certain sadness.

It may be that a member of the ship's company was Mentioned-in-Despatches (M-i-D) but I know not. Oak leaves on the medal ribbon denote M-i-D.

All of the ship's company would have been awarded these [Campaign Stars](#), a Clasp and Medal – six all told, worn in the following order:

- The 1939-1945 Star
- The Atlantic Star
- The Burma Star with Pacific Clasp
- The Italy Star
- War Medal 1939-1945

The reverse of all stars is blank and no British Campaign Stars were engraved with the name of the recipient. The Campaign Stars were struck in yellow copper zinc alloy by the Royal Mint, whose engravers designed each of them. The Campaign Star ribbons were designed by HM King George VI himself.

The War Medal 1939-1945 was struck in cupro-nickel at the Royal Mint in London.

The Pacific Clasp on the ribbon of the Burma Star counts as a medal but there was a maximum of six stars allowed per person.

Service in the Indian Ocean would have earned The Burma Star; the award of the Pacific Clasp was because no one was awarded both The Burma Star and The Pacific Star – one or the other. Had the ship served first in the Pacific, the issue for the men of HMS *Wager* would have been The Pacific Star, perhaps with Burma Clasp if the ship had served later in the Indian Ocean.

The Arctic Star²⁰⁶ was instituted on 19 Dec 2012, after much campaigning, and would be worn after The Atlantic Star. All of those who were on board when at Spitsbergen in Jun 1944 [qualified for this newly-authorised medal](#).

HMS *Wager* – In Reserve and Disposal

HMS *Wager* remained in reserve in Portsmouth until she was towed to South Africa in 1948, her being one of four of the former 27DF to be allocated to the South Atlantic Reserve Fleet in Simonstown. She returned to Portsmouth in 1955 and was placed on the Disposal List.

The ship's bell²⁰⁷ (engraved 'H.M.S. WAGER 1943') was auctioned by the Admiralty and purchased by 'Basher' Watkin.

In Oct 1956, she was sold to the Yugoslav Navy and renamed *Pula* (Pennant Number R22). After some 15 years' service, *Pula* was sold for scrapping in 1971, thirty years after the order for her was placed by the Admiralty.

HMS *Wager* – selected summary chronology

3 Dec 1941 – order placed with John Brown & Company, Clydebank

20 Nov 1942 – laid down as Yard Number 603

1 Nov 1943 – launched

3 Apr 1944 – Commissioning Service

5 Apr 1944 – first day at sea > start of builder's trials + Acceptance Trials

14 Apr 1944 – completion date + Acceptance by ASCBS; sailed 19 Apr 1944

20 Apr 1944 – arrived Scapa Flow, Orkney Islands; sailed 7 May 1944
 7 May to early Jul 1944 – with the Home Fleet, based at Scapa Flow, operations off Norway
 7-8 Jun 1944 – Operation *Kruschen* > off the coast of Norway, but weather too poor for flying
 16-20 Jun 1944 – escorted HMS *Jamaica* to and from Spitsbergen, Svalbard
 24 Jun 1944 – arrived Scapa Flow; sailed 30 Jun 1944
 1 Jul 1944 – arrived Greenock
 mid-Jul 1944 – Foreign Service Leave for the ship's company
 26 Jul 1944 – sailed Greenock, Scotland, escorting RMMV *Stirling Castle*
 1 Aug 1944 – arrived Gibraltar; sailed 10 Aug 1944
 11 Aug 1944 – arrived Algiers, capital of Algeria²⁰⁸; sailed 13 Aug 1944, escorting HMS *Ramillies* to south of Corsica
 15 Aug 1944 – arrived Malta GC; sailed 17 Aug 1944
 19 Aug 1944 – arrived Alexandria, Egypt; sailed 25 Aug 1944
 25 Aug 1944 – transit of Suez Canal
 29 Aug 1944 – arrived Aden; sailed 31 Aug 1944
 7 Sep 1944 – arrived Addu Atoll, Maldiv Islands; sailed 8 Aug 1944
 9 Sep 1944 – arrived Colombo, Ceylon; sailed 11 Sep 1944
 12 Sep 1944 – arrived Trincomalee, Ceylon (the ship's base until Jan 1945); sailed 15 Oct 1944 for bombardment of the Nicobar Islands
 21 Oct 1944 – arrived Trincomalee; sailed 30 Oct 1944
 2 Nov 1944 – arrived Bombay, India; sailed 4 Nov 1944
 8 Nov 1944 – arrived Addu Atoll; sailed same day
 9 Nov 1944 – arrived Colombo; sailed 10 Nov 1944
 12 Nov 1944 – arrived Bombay for repairs; sailed 18 Nov 1944
 21 Nov 1944 – arrived Trincomalee; sailed 4 Dec 1944
 6 Dec 1944 – arrived Cochin, India; sailed 8 Dec 1944
 12 Dec 1944 – arrived Trincomalee; sailed 17 Dec 1944, part of Force 69
 19-20 Dec 1944 – Operation *Robson* > strikes by naval aircraft from Force 67 on refineries at Pangkalan Brandan, Sumatra (HMS *Wager* escorting the tanker, RFA *Wave King*)
 22 Dec 1944 – arrived Trincomalee; sailed 1 Jan 1945, part of Force 65
 4 Jan 1945 – Operation *Lentil* > further strikes by naval aircraft on refineries at Pangkalan Brandan, Sumatra
 7 Jan 1945 – arrived Trincomalee; sailed 16 Jan 1945 with Force 63
 24 Jan 1945 – Operation *Meridian I* > strikes by naval aircraft on refineries at Pladjoe, Sumatra

29 Jan 1945 – Operation *Meridian II* > strikes by naval aircraft on refineries at Palembang, Sumatra
 4 Feb 1945 – arrived Fremantle, Western Australia; sailed same day
 10 Feb 1945 – arrived Sydney, New South Wales; sailed 28 Feb 1945
 9 Mar 1945 – arrived Manus, Admiralty Islands; sailed 18 Mar 1945
 20 Mar 1945 – arrived Ulithi Atoll, Caroline Islands; sailed 23 Mar 1945
 26 Mar 1945 – Operation *Iceberg One*, off Sakishima Gunto
 23 Apr 1945 – arrived Leyte, The Philippines; sailed 1 May 1945
 8 May 1945 (VE Day) – arrived Manus; sailed next day
 12 May 1945 – arrived Sydney; sailed 15 May 1945
 19 May 1945 – arrived Auckland, New Zealand for refit; sailed 14 Jul 1945
 17 Jul 1945 – arrived Sydney; sailed 22 Jul 1945
 23 Jul 1945 – arrived Jervis Bay, ACT; sailed 27 Jul 1945
 28 Jul 1945 – arrived Sydney; sailed 31 Jul 1945
 5 Aug 1945 – arrived Manus; sailed 6 Aug 1945 escorting HMS *Duke of York*
 9 Aug 1945 (second atomic bomb) – arrived Guam; sailed 12 Aug 1945
 16 Aug 1945 (VJ Day 15 Aug) – arrived in Japanese waters, joined US forces
 27 Aug 1945 – arrived Sagami Bay, Tokyo; sailed next day
 28 Aug 1945 – arrived Tokyo Bay; sailed 9 or 10 Sep 1945
 (2 Sep 1945 – in Tokyo Bay for formal signing of the Instrument of Surrender;
 12 Sep 1945 – arrived Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands, Japan; sailed same day
 16 Sep 1945 – arrived Hong Kong; sailed 20 Sep 1945
 20 Sep 1945 – arrived Canton, China; sailed 21 Sep 1945
 21 Sep 1945 – arrived Hong Kong; sailed 18 Oct 1945
 20 Oct 1945 – arrived Haiphong, China; sailed 21 Oct 1945
 22 Oct 1945 – arrived Hong Kong; sailed 4 Nov 1945
 9 Nov 1945 – arrived Darwin; sailed 10 Nov 1945
 17 Nov 1945 – arrived Sydney; sailed 1 Dec 1945, escorting HMS *Duke of York*
 7 Dec 1945 – arrived Fremantle; sailed same day
 11 Dec 1945 – arrived Christmas Island; sailed same day
 14 Dec 1945 – arrived Singapore; sailed same day
 19 Dec 1945 – arrived Colombo; sailed 21 Dec 1945
 26 Dec 1945 – arrived Aden; sailed 27 Dec 1945
 31 Dec 1944 – transit of Suez Canal
 31 Dec 1945 – arrived Port Said; sailed 2 Jan 1946
 8 Jan 1946 – arrived Gibraltar; sailed 10 Jan 1946
 14 Jan 1946 – arrived Portsmouth for the first time and paid off
 May 1946 – reduced to reserve, in 'B' Reserve Fleet, Portsmouth

1948 to 1955 – in reserve, in South Africa, probably at Simonstown

1955 – placed on the Disposal List

1956 – sold to the Yugoslav Navy, renamed *Pula*

1971 – sold by the Yugoslav Navy for scrapping



Join the Royal Navy and See the World was a recruiting slogan of the 1920s, more often stated as Join the Navy and See the World.

HMS *Wager* certainly saw a fair amount of the world – and a lot of the sea – in her 646 days in commission, 498 days of which were during the Second World War. She spent at least 300 days (or parts of days) at sea, between 5 Apr 1944 and 14 Jan 1946, often out of sight of land. Just one commission flying the White Ensign in those twenty-one months and the same captain throughout. Most of the ship's company served together for the whole commission.

HMS *Wager* travelled a distance of some 60,000 nautical miles all told²⁰⁹. She paid visits to some thirty ports in some twenty different countries.

The song [We Saw the Sea](#) by Fred Astaire, in the film *Follow the Fleet* (1936) began,

We joined the navy to see the world
And what did we see? We saw the sea
We saw the Pacific and the Atlantic
But the Atlantic isn't romantic
And the Pacific isn't what it's cracked up to be

We joined the navy to do or die
But we didn't do and we didn't die
We were much too busy
Looking at the ocean and the sky

And what did we see? We saw the sea
We saw the Atlantic and the Pacific

But the Pacific isn't terrific
And the Atlantic isn't what it's cracked up to be



Naval and Maritime War Memorials

There is no Royal Navy war memorial in London, the Admiralty deciding to erect three memorials in each of the Port Divisions, all unveiled in 1924 – Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth. Today, there are many memorials at the [National Memorial Arboretum](#) in Staffordshire, and that is where HM The King attended a memorial service marking VJ Day 80 on 15 Aug 2025.

These [memorials are all in London](#)²¹⁰:

- The Cenotaph – Whitehall
- Monument to the Women of World War II – Whitehall
- Royal Marines Memorial – The Mall, near Admiralty Arch
- Fleet Air Arm Memorial – Victoria Embankment Gardens
- National Submarine Memorial – Victoria Embankment
- Merchant Navy Memorials – Trinity Square Gardens
- Far East Prisoners-of-War Memorial – Camden High Street, Camden Town (near Mornington Crescent Underground station)



Museum Ships, Naval and Maritime Museums

- HMS *Cavalier* (1944) – a C class destroyer launched five months after HMS *Wager*, she has the same proportions as the W class > [Chatham Historic Dockyard](#), Kent. In 2007, HMS *Cavalier* was designated as the National Destroyer Memorial. Close by is a conventional submarine, HMS *Ocelot* (1962), larger but broadly comparable to the wartime T class.
- [HMS Belfast](#) (1938) – a Southampton class light cruiser launched in 1938, she certainly presents a picture of a large ship in service in the Second World War > moored near Tower Bridge, London. Many of her internal fittings would be exactly the same as those in HMS *Wager*. Visitors to the ship may climb up to the flag deck and climb down to the machinery spaces.

- [Fleet Air Arm Museum](#) > Royal Naval Air Station, Yeovilton, Somerset BA22 8HW. Part of a collection of museums forming the National Museum of the Royal Navy. Most of the naval aircraft that flew in the war in the Pacific are on display at Yeovilton, although one or two may be in the Reserve Collection of aircraft nearby.
- [Royal Air Force Museum](#) > Hendon, Middlesex NW9 5LL. No naval aircraft but from the Supermarine Spitfire came the Seafire, an aircraft that looked similar and was of a similar size.
- [Royal Navy Submarine Museum](#) > Gosport, Hampshire PO12 2AS. The A class conventional submarine HMS *Alliance* is the prime exhibit, a boat very similar in size to the T class boats operating with the BPF.
- [Royal Marines Museum](#) > the former site at Eastney closed in 2017. The 'Reimagination of Boathouse 6' Project has received Development Round funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The Project aims to develop an 1840s Boathouse, in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, into a new home for the Royal Marines Museum. [£3.5m still needs to be raised](#).
- [Royal Naval Museum](#) > Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, HM Naval Base, Portsmouth, Hampshire PO1 3NH.
- [LCT 7074](#) > The D-Day Story, Clarence Esplanade, Portsmouth, Hampshire PO5 3NT. This Landing Craft Tank, a survivor from D-Day, 6 Jun 1944, is similar to many of the US landing craft used by the USN and USMC in the Pacific.
- [Imperial War Museum, London](#) > Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ.
- [National Maritime Museum](#) > Romney Road, Greenwich, London SE10 9NF.



Acknowledgements

- Retired naval officers various for their insight, advice and personal knowledge.
- Trinity House for further information about the captain, 'Basher' Watkin
- Wikipedia – various articles, including [HMS Wager \(R98\)](#)
- [Naval History](#) online > [HMS Wager](#)
- [Drawing of HMS Wager](#) at the top of the article
- The wider Wager family – the ship's company and their families
- [HMS Wager website](#) – and especially the journals, diaries and notes of members of the ship's company posted thereon viz, the unnamed junior

watchkeeping officer, [Stoker Ted Elwick](#) (born 1922), [AB \(ST\) David Savin](#) (1923-1986), [AB \(R\) Len Ackroyd](#) and [Temporary Surgeon Lieutenant George Gayman](#) (1915-2002).

- Notes from an interview with Signalmen Ted Longshaw²¹¹ (1926-2011), taken during a conversation in Ye Olde Chesire Cheese, in Fleet Street, after the Annual National Service for Seafarers at St Paul's Cathedral on 13 Oct 2010, have proved very useful indeed – thanks Ted!
- Also found on the website are [deck plans](#) of a similar destroyer and a [detailed description of the compartments and fittings](#). I have attempted to construct a [Scheme of Complement](#), adding names of the officers and ratings, where known. (This article is not illustrated but there are many photographs of sailors and the ship on this website, and film footage too).



Bibliography, Filmography and Sources

(Books, publications and films are listed in order of the date published or released)

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- *Very Ordinary Seaman* by J P W Mallalieu (Victor Gollancz, 1944) – the author, a journalist (and later Navy Minister in the 1960s), describes brilliantly life on the lower deck in a wartime destroyer.
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- (1910-1979) served throughout the war, commanding three small ships; he was Mentioned-in-Despatches in 1943.
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Lester May – Camden Town, 14 Aug 2025 (with corrections, 19 Sep 2025)

¹ [Sir David Attenborough](#) (born 8 May 1926) served in the Royal Navy as an Instructor Officer during his National Service, 1947-1949, serving ashore in North Wales and the Firth of Forth.

² Commodore Naval Ship Acceptance > see note 58 below.

³ D448 – D forms were Dockyard forms (S forms were ships' forms, B forms were Barracks' forms). The D448 was a formal document, a formal reading on the state of the ship on handover from builder to the Admiralty.

The shipyard manager would read the list of outstanding work, defects and trials not completed, the representative of CNSA accepting.

⁴ The [Wardroom](#) is the name of the mess for Royal Navy commissioned officers in ships, submarines, naval air stations and shore establishments. Except in minor war vessels with perhaps two or three officers, the captain of a ship 'messed' alone but would be invited by the Mess President into the wardroom on special occasions.

⁵ HM Ships fly the Red Ensign – the ensign of the British Merchant Navy – while undergoing shipbuilders' sea trials, as the ship remains the property of the shipbuilder until formal acceptance by the Royal Navy.

⁶ 'Jacky' Fisher (1841-1920) was, arguably the second most-important figure in British Naval History after Admiral Lord Nelson. No great sea battles won but an innovator and incomparable naval reformer, [Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher](#) was First Naval Lord and First Sea Lord in the first decade of the Twentieth Century and prepared the Royal Navy for the coming Great War (1914-1918). Most notable was his introduction of the new battleship type, HMS *Dreadnought* (1906). He was twice First Sea Lord, retiring finally at the age of 74.

⁷ Many countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth [declared war](#) on 3 Sep 1939, along with the UK. South Africa declared war on Germany on 6 Sep 1939 and Canada did so on 10 Sep 1939.

⁸ Lieutenant Michael Parker RAN, later RN, was First Lieutenant of HMS *Wessex* and later was, first Equerry to Prince Philip and, then, Private Secretary to HRH The [Duke of Edinburgh](#) from 1947-1957. Parker died in Melbourne, age 81, in 2001.

⁹ 1944 was a Leap Year.

¹⁰ Excerpts on [YouTube](#) of a talk by the American historian Victor Davis Hanson

¹¹ The term 'British Commonwealth of Nations' was first used in 1921, having been proposed by Jan Smuts in 1917. It was officially adopted in 1926. The symbolic end of the British Empire was, arguably, the handover of Hong Kong to China on 1 Jul 1997 but the Empire declined gradually from the 1950s. Empire Day was marked on 24 May, Queen Victoria's birthday, but on 24 May 1958 it was called British Commonwealth Day and, from 1966, Commonwealth Day. From 1977, Commonwealth Day was (and is) marked on the second Monday of March.

¹² The UK paid the last instalment of its [wartime debts](#) to both the United States and to Canada on 31 Dec 2006.

¹³ QARNNS – Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service – were the Royal Navy's nursing officers and nurses, all women, serving in naval hospitals and larger sick quarters and sick bays ashore, at home and in naval bases overseas. Numbers for nurses in the Second World War were given as a total for all the services and I have estimated the number that were likely to have been in the QARNNS.

¹⁴ [Flag Officers](#) are admirals who fly an [admiral's flag](#) at sea or ashore; flags differ according to the rank of admiral. Strictly, all other admirals are Officers of Flag Rank (who are not entitled to fly a flag). Only a pedant might demur at my suggesting that a Commodore at sea, flying a [broad pennant](#) in his flagship, is not called a Flag Officer! A [Convoy Commodore](#) flew a special broad pennant in his ship, with a blue St George's Cross.

¹⁵ "Age does not weary them." [Admiral Sir Walter Cowan](#) KCB DSO* MVO (1871-1956), a hero of Estonia, had been placed on the Retired List in 1931. At the age of 69 he was recalled to service and first served ashore in the UK. In 1941 and 1942 he saw action off the coast and ashore in North Africa, with No.8 (Guards) Commando and, weeks before his 72nd birthday, he was taken prisoner by the Italians. Repatriated after Italy's surrender, he again saw action in 1944 with the Commandos in Italy and the Adriatic. He retired a second time in 1945, at the age of 73, perhaps 74.

¹⁶ From *All Hell Let Loose* (p.670) by Sir Max Hastings (HarperPress, 2011).

¹⁷ Figures quoted are from *All Hell Let Loose* (p.670) by Sir Max Hastings (HarperPress, 2011). USMC – United States Marine Corps.

¹⁸ From *All Hell Let Loose* (p.669) by Sir Max Hastings (HarperPress, 2011).

¹⁹ [Empire ships](#) of many types were built in British yards (some in overseas yards) both to increase the number of Merchant Ships required for the war effort and, of course, to replace war losses. The number of Merchant Ships flying the Red Ensign (the ensign of the British Merchant Fleet) swelled to 12,000 during the war! 2,710 Liberty Ships (a British concept) and 534 Victory Ships were built in American shipyards, mostly on the west coast of the US.

²⁰ [Paymaster Lieutenant Geoffrey Stanning RN](#), badly wounded on the bridge as all others were killed, took command and order the ship to be beached. Stanning was awarded the DSO, a rare distinction for a Paymaster. See Supplement to [The London Gazette](#).

²¹ Most of the ship-to-ship signalling in the BPF was visual – Aldis lamp, Semaphore flags or flag hoists.

²² *Warships of World War II* by H T Lenton & J J Colledge (Ian Allan, 1964) – pages 79-94

²³ The [Royal Canadian Navy](#) (RCN) dates from 1910 but it was small in 1939, with just 11 vessels and 1,800 officers and men. The RCN expanded significantly during the war, the world's third largest by 1945, with over 400 vessels and 100,000 personnel.

²⁴ *Warships of World War II* by H T Lenton & J J Colledge (Ian Allan, 1964) – pages 95-126 and 133-135

²⁵ The C class was to have been a Destroyer Leader plus eight but was reduced to Leader plus four by the Labour Government of the time. All were transferred to the RCN and may explain, in part, why the C class followed the Z class in 1943/44. Names beginning with A were given to submarines launched from Aug 1943 onwards.

²⁶ Royal Australian Navy

²⁷ Anti-Aircraft

²⁸ *Warships of World War II* by H T Lenton & J J Colledge (Ian Allan, 1964) – pages 126-133

²⁹ The Age of Sail is generally considered to be from the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 to 1860, superseded by the Age of Steam 1860-1910. The heyday of the Age of Sail was, of course, the Wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, from 1793 to 1805/1815.

³⁰ See note 25 above

³¹ HMS *Quilliam* was named after Lieutenant John Quilliam, First Lieutenant of HMS *Victory* at the Battle of Trafalgar, 1805. Quilliam was a Manxman.

³² Named after Captain Edward Rotherham, who commanded HMS *Royal Sovereign* at the Battle of Trafalgar, 1805. However, the ship's badge and every entry for the ship's name seen in various books and online, it is spelled Rotherham, as in the place name. This may have been by design but, if it was a mistake, it will not have been the first time that a ship's name was spelled wrongly or unusually (HMS *Peterel*, not HMS *Petrel*) or, indeed, had an alternative spelling confusion (e.g. HMS *Wistaria* or HMS *Wisteria*).

³³ Why no Y is odd, as I can find seven perfectly good names from naval history starting with Y! The cruiser HMS *York* was lost in 1941, so why not a new HMS *York* from 1944? And Yarborough, Yarmouth, Yarrow, Yarnton, Yeoman, Yeovil – the Leader could surely have been HMS *Cook*.

³⁴ The Ships' Names Committee is not a standing committee and seldom meets, the selecting of names being made by agreement of a number of members of the Admiralty Board, files ('packs' in the RN) passing between them. In the 1960s/70s, the Secretary of the Ship's Names Committee was the Assistant Secretary to the Controller of the Navy (*aka* Third Sea Lord).

³⁵ Several books have been written about The *Wager* Mutiny, the first an eponymous title by Instructor Captain S W C Pack (Alvin Redman, 1964). Then came *The Wager Disaster – Mayhem, Mutiny and Murder in the South Seas* by Rear Admiral C H Layman (Uniform, 2014). The most recent is *The Wager – A tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder* by David Grann (Doubleday, 2023); an abridged version was broadcast as BBC Radio 4's [Book of the Week](#) in Jan 2024.

³⁶ *Wager* is not common enough a surname to be listed in *The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames* by Basil Cottle (Penguin, 1967)

³⁷ No surprise to find HMS *Ascot*, HMS *Doncaster*, HMS *Epsom*, HMS *Goodwood* and HMS *Sandown* but HMS *Gatwick* and other racecourses long gone may be a surprise.

³⁸ Some of the Derby winners in those years had names that were quite unsuitable for even minor warships. Those 24 selected by the Ships' Names Committee during the First World War are nevertheless unusual – HMS *Bend Or*, HMS *Donovan*, HMS *Flying Fox*, HMS *Isinglass*, HMS *Merry Hampton* and HMS *Sir Visto* to name some. Only one of those names is used today – the minesweeper [HMS Flying Fox](#) became the drill Ship for the RNVR unit at Bristol in 1920 and, by then a RNR unit, moved ashore to a new HQ in 1972 (the ship herself was towed away and scrapped in Cardiff in 1973).

³⁹ My father, AB (LTO) Walter May served in HMS *Wager* 1944-47, and left the RN as a naval pensioner in 1947. He married in 1948 and I was the first of his two children, born 1951. Perhaps it is no surprise that Lester May was named after the then up-and-coming flat race jockey, Lester Piggott (1935-2022) – the racing legend won his first race in 1948 and went on to ride nine winners of The Derby. No need to wager that I was named after Lester Piggott, it's a dead cert!

⁴⁰ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary – on historical principles* (OUP, 1973)

⁴¹ The convention used, throughout this document, to date a ship, is the year that she was launched.

⁴² On the same day, during the [Battle of the Atlantic](#) (1939-1945), the Norwegian Navy's Flower class Corvette HMNoS *Potentilla* sank the German U-Boat *U-184* off Newfoundland, while escorting Convoy ONS 144.

⁴³ The largest, that is, until construction of the two modern aircraft carriers HMS *Queen Elizabeth* (2014) and HMS *Prince of Wales* (2017).

⁴⁴ The lovely poem, [Number 534](#), by the mariner and Poet Laureate John Masefield ((1878-1967), was published in *The Times* on the day of the launch of [RMS Queen Mary](#), 26 Sep 1934, and in the Official

Programme for the launch by 'the sponsor', HM Queen Mary, wife of King George V. Read the poem out aloud! Note: a number of versions of this poem posted online have mistakes (e.g. unguarded instead of unregarded) – the version published in *The New York Times* is, I think, perfect.

⁴⁵ Built in 1907, the 150-foot-high [Titan](#) was the world's first electrically-powered cantilever crane. Nelson's Column, in London, is just over 169 feet high.

⁴⁶ The V Class Leader, HMS *Hardy*, was built by John Brown, commissioned in Aug 1943 and torpedoed and sunk on 30 Jan 1944 – she had less than six months' operational service. The pride of the wartime German Navy – the Kriegsmarine – was the battleship [Bismarck](#). Laid down 1 Jul 1936, launched 14 Feb 1939, commissioned 24 Aug 1940, trials were hampered by construction problems and wartime bombings and defects and trials were not fully completed until 16 May 1941. She sailed on her first operation on 19 May 1941 and was sunk on 27 May 1941 – just nine days at sea. Her sister ship Tirpitz barely sailed operationally but did fire her guns in a bombardment – she was a '[Fleet in Being](#)'.

⁴⁷ John Brown & Company suffered some huge losses from 1964-1967. It merged with other shipbuilders in 1968 to form the consortium Upper Clyde Shipbuilders but collapsed in 1971.

⁴⁸ In a written answer in the House of Commons in early 1939, the approximate cost of a K class destroyer (very similar to the W class) was stated as £500,000.

⁴⁹ As well as the naval architects and marine engineers, draughtsmen and estimators, there were many [trades required](#) to work together to build a warship. Riggers, welders, solderers, fitters, pipefitters, electricians, structural fabricators, plumbers, carpenters, quality control (QC) inspectors, supervisors, chargehands, surveyors and all the usual administration, of course, of running any large business. Much of the work was piecework and this was owing to the fluctuations in work although, doubtless, the Second World War offered consistent employment for the workforce. This article about [shipbuilding in Sunderland](#) gives an idea of the history, the trials and troubles of the shipbuilding industry.

⁵⁰ Casualties of War (or war's end, in these cases) – on 5 Jun 1943, two Battle Class destroyers were ordered from John Brown. HMS *Talavera* (Yard Number 617) was laid down 4 Sep 1944 and launched 27 Aug 1945 and HMS *Trincomalee* (Yard Number 618) was laid down 5 Feb 1945 and launched 8 Jan 1946. Both hulls were towed to Troon for scrapping in early 1946. An ignominious end and nugatory human effort.

⁵¹ Cruisers had a low construction priority, the Admiralty's principal need being aircraft carriers and destroyers for anti-submarine warfare. HMS *Bellerophon* was renamed HMS *Tiger* before being launched; she was not commissioned until 1959 and paid off into reserve in 1978.

⁵² She later inspired HMS *Troutbridge*, the ship in the BBC Radio series [The Navy Lark](#) (244 episodes, 1959-1977) > "Left hand down a bit!"

⁵³ LA (low angle) guns were designed for surface gunnery and for shooting at targets ashore, whereas HA (high angle) guns were designed to fire at aircraft.

⁵⁴ The general consensus is that 'the tide turned' in the Battle of the Atlantic in May 1943 and the Allies expected to defeat the 'U-Boat Peril', as Churchill called it, in the coming years.

⁵⁵ The name of the sponsor of HMS *Wager* has not been established. The Sponsor launches the ship and would likely have an attachment to the ship for the years ahead. The British tradition is that a ship is always launched by a woman. Of course, in the life of HMS *Wager* the association between ship and Sponsor was almost impossible. Ships are launched stern first and according to the state of the tide. On the day of the launch, the Sponsor would have said "I name this ship *Wager*. May God bless her and all who sail in her. A lever on the launching platform, is then pulled by the Sponsor and a bottle of wine (surely not Champagne in wartime?) is broken on the vessel's bow, the triggers are released, and the ship, slowly at first but quickly gathering speed, slides down the ways into the water." (*The Oxford Companion to Ships & The Sea*, qv).

⁵⁶ A [nautical mile](#) (abbreviation – nm) is today defined as exactly 1,852 metres (about 6,076 feet). A [knot](#) is one nautical mile per hour.

⁵⁷ W class destroyers were the last class to carry this weapon, which had been in service since 1918. The Z class had newer 4.5" guns.

⁵⁸ ASCBS became CSCBS (a Commodore) after the war and CNSA in the late Twentieth Century – Commodore Naval Ship Acceptance.

⁵⁹ Lt Cdr (E) T H Butlin is listed in *The Navy List of Retired Officers* 1997 as being alive and in receipt of a naval pension, meaning that, at least, he served a full career of some 17 years from the age of 21. He was likely then in his early 80s. His seniority as a Lt Cdr (E) is stated as 1 Oct 1946, and my guess is that should have read 1 Oct 1944 (as the Engineer's Writer stated that he shipped his half stripe while at Trincomalee). The discrepancy could be a mistake, or perhaps he was subsequently sentenced by court-martial to losing two years' seniority in the rank! The Engineer's Writer and a junior officer state that, while in Sydney, Butlin was promoted to Commander (E) and transferred to the staff of Captain D27 (Flotilla Engineer Officer) in HMS *Kempenfelt* –as an

Acting Commander (E). Lieutenant (E) R G Bastow RN transferred from HMS *King George V* and took over as the Marine Engineer Officer of HMS *Wager*. Bastow retired as a Lt Cdr (E) – seniority 1 Oct 1948 – and is listed in *The Navy List of Retired Officers* 1981.

⁶⁰ An Engineer's Writer was a Stoker rating selected to deal with the engineering paperwork and records, working in the Engineer's Office on board a ship. A short course in office work would have been undertaken. Later in the century, the role was given to a rating of the Writer Branch. Stoker Ted Elwick kept a personal journal and this is posted on the [HMS Wager website](#).

⁶¹ The Royal Navy did not establish its Electrical Branch (with green distinction cloth for officers – 'greenies') until 1946.

⁶² [Roland Chisnell Watkin](#) (a Manxman, born in Jun 1911 – probably 6 Jun 1911) transferred to the Royal Navy from the RNR, probably in 1938; he was one of the so-called 'Hungry Hundred' Merchant Navy officers who transferred from the RNR to the RN as the Admiralty became concerned about the clouds of war that were gathering. He married Jessie Margaret Kewley in 1939 and they had two [daughters](#). He specialised as a Signal Officer. He commanded the patrol vessel HMS *Sheldrake* (1937) from Jun 1941 to Jun 1942, where he was Mentioned-in-Despatches (27 Jun 1941). Promoted to Lieutenant Commander on 6 Jun 1943, age 32, he commanded the new Hunt class escort destroyer HMS *Haydon* (1942) from her commissioning in Jul 1942 to Nov 1943. He was probably promoted to Commander some time in 1946, after he had left HMS *Wager*, for he was certainly promoted to four-stripe Captain on 30 Jun 1953. I was told that he was a successful Executive Officer of a Cruiser around 1950. From around 1960 to 1962/63 he was in command (and Captain Mine Countermeasures (Home)) of HMS *Lochinvar*, a naval shore base for the Mine Countermeasures Flotilla and Fishery Protection Squadron at Port Edgar, South Queensferry, West Lothian. Most Captains RN were retired on reaching nine years' seniority, unless selected for promotion to Rear Admiral or, alternatively, if the exigencies of the Service called for a continuation of service. In *The Navy List* of Autumn 1965, Captain R C Watkin CBE RN (appointed CBE 13 Jun 1964) was the second-most senior serving officer on the List of Captains on the Active List and was serving as Commodore Superintendent Contract Built Ships (CSCBS), a post he held from Oct 1962 until he retired in Apr 1966. In retirement, as a Younger Brother of Trinity House (sworn in 1956), he was occasionally at sea in UK waters in THV *Patricia*, the Trinity House flagship. One officer who knew him in the early 1960s described him as "substantially built, with a florid complexion and his having a tough reputation." He was made CBE in the [Birthday Honours](#) 1964. In 1971 he stood, unsuccessfully, for election to the Isle of Man's House of Keys. In the British feature film for children, *Danger Point* (1973 – 56 mins), which was filmed in the Isle of Man, the home of 'Basher' Watkin (his farmhouse was in Jurby), the last-named actor in the credits is 'Roland Watkin – Car Driver' (watch from about 38 mins onwards; the car is a 1920s Morris Cowley 'Bullnose' Tourer). That small part is certainly played by 'Basher', age then about 62, and he is also thanked by the producers, acknowledged by rank, presumably his wife was 'Mrs I M Watkin BA'. Captain R C Watkin CBE MNI RN died, age 76 or 77, in 1988. See also [this story](#) of a run ashore in London with Prince Philip in 1948. A number of the COs and XO's of destroyers in 27DF were friends of Prince Philip – Lieutenant The Prince Philip of Greece RN was First Lieutenant of the Half Leader, HMS *Whelp*, from early 1944 to Jan 1946. (Ted Longshaw recalled that, towards the end of the war, he was loaned to sister-ship HMS *Whelp* for four weeks and, in Prince Philip's cabin, there was a framed photograph of [HRH Princess Elizabeth](#) on his desk).

⁶³ Senior Ratings were the Chief Petty Officer and Petty Officers, dressed in 'fore and aft' rig (uniform) with a peaked cap, jacket and tie. Junior Ratings were the Leading Hands and Able Ratings, dressed in 'square rig', the traditional Royal Navy sailors' uniform. A Leading Hand (Leading Seaman, Leading Signaller, Leading Stoker, Leading Cook, and so on) was equivalent to a Corporal in the Royal Marines and Army. One Leading Hand would be detailed to be 'Leading Hand of the Mess', living with all his messmates, yet responsible for discipline and mess cleanliness among other things; such a duty might be carried out for three months and then another Leading Hand would win the job. The name Rating comes from the sailors who served in HM Ships in the Age of Sail; these ships were rated First Rate (like HMS *Victory*), Second Rate and on, according to their number of guns – and their men were, accordingly, called Naval Ratings.

⁶⁴ ERAs – Engine Room Artificers. A long naval apprenticeship meant ERAs were highly qualified and, in order to pay them adequately, advancement to Petty Officer (ERA2) was quick, advancement to Chief Petty Officer (ERA 1st Class) too, much quicker than for other branches, so they tended to be rather younger than many of the Petty Officers and Chief Petty Officers from the other branches. Chief ERA was the pinnacle, still a CPO but everyone would know the *Chief* ERA, if borne! In their formal No.1 uniform, artificers wore no branch badges and that was distinction enough. The documentary film [Tiffy \(Naval Artificer\)](#) (1952) gives a good idea of their training and work in the Fleet.

⁶⁵ Called Pennant Number from 1948 onwards.

⁶⁶ There were a number of periods during the Second World War, mostly in 1941, 1942 and 1943, designated [Warship Week](#). Essentially, they were National Savings campaigns aimed at raising money for the Exchequer in order to build more ships for the Royal Navy. Once a certain amount of money was raised in a particular civil community, a city, town or village was allocated a ship to adopt, thus beginning, in some cases, affiliations between a ship and community that continue to this day.

⁶⁷ The details of the accident are well explained by Stoker Ted Elwick in his journal.

⁶⁸ Scapa Flow, in the Orkney Islands, is a natural harbour that was an important Fleet Anchorage in both the First World War and the Second World War. Not as safe as was first thought, as the sinking by Günther Prien's U-47 of Rear Admiral Henry Blagrove's flagship, the battleship HMS *Royal Oak*, was to show (Blagrove and 834 officers, ratings and boys lost their lives).

⁶⁹ [Typhoon Connie](#) 1-7 Jun 1945 seriously affected the US Navy's Third Fleet

⁷⁰ PO Steward – Petty Officer Steward, the senior Steward rating in the ship. Stewards at Action Stations usually formed First Aid Parties.

⁷¹ [HMS Tyne](#) was one of two 10,850-ton Hecla class Destroyer Depot Ships launched in early 1940. HMS *Hecla* was lost during Operation *Torch* in the Mediterranean, on 12 Nov 1942.

⁷² The Service Certificate (SC) was officially titled [Royal Navy Certificate of Service](#) (form S.459); the form was established c.1853 and superseded in c.2006 by a dismal computerised record of service. Made of linen parchment, it was a document maintained for every rating, with handwritten entries, by Writer branch ratings in a ship's office or the office of the ship's tender (or, in very large shore establishments, in a Service Certificate Office – the SC Office). Royal Marines other ranks, QARNNS and WRNS ratings had very similar documentation. The document was given to the individual on leaving the Royal Navy and, along with a branch History Sheet, it is often the only official document an individual, or the family, has. No such document was maintained for officers of any of the Naval services – RN, RM, QARNNS, WRNS. Note – if a ship sank, or was lost in some other way, often the SC was lost too. In such circumstances, a duplicate paper document was issued but it was rather dull compared to the characterful original. See also this information – [National Archives](#).

⁷³ HOs – Hostilities Only. HOs were ratings serving in the Royal Navy for the duration of the war only. This brought to the fore aspects of civilian life from which the armed forces were hitherto mainly shielded. Homosexuality was illegal in the UK until 1967 and in HM Forces until 2001 but, in wartime, there was some relaxation of attitude regarding matters private. Indeed, that was true of the social and private lives of many young people at home, both civilian and uniformed. [Quentin Crisp](#) (article somewhat absurdly written), when called up, was turned down by the Army, his 'flamboyance' all too evident, but others signed on, kept quiet and served their King. But not all kept quiet. Ted Longshaw told me that two HO ratings on board HMS *Wager* had become a unit and, for a laugh on a long sea passage, had their 'banns' read in the messdeck on three consecutive Sundays. It didn't affect the work of the ship or the outcome of the war, though the laws closed in after the end of hostilities, witness the treatment of the man on the [current £50 banknote](#).

⁷⁴ r/v – rendezvous.

⁷⁵ On board HMS *Jamaica* were one years' supplies for the garrison and "a few score" Norwegian personnel who would take over the wireless station until their reliefs arrived one year later (from the MO's Journal)

⁷⁶ [Temporary Surgeon Lieutenant George Gayman's journal](#) covers this story, and others, in much more detail! Medical Officers may go for days, weeks and even months, with their not being called on to do much serious work but, in his first three months on board HMS *Wager*, he certainly made his mark.

⁷⁷ The puppy is not named. [Pets on board HM Ships](#) were not uncommon. Cats were useful when a ship had rats and Jolly Jack had on board all sorts of creatures, some 'official' and some illicit. Dogs were also popular, but monkeys and parrots were known to be members of a ship's company, in large warships and in minor war vessels. A warship might transport a gift of some large creature, such as an elephant, from a foreign potentate to our home shores, either for the Sovereign or for a zoo. London Zoo is the world's oldest scientific zoo – opened 1828. Sailors would fish over the side of a ship in harbour, of course! Admiral Lord Collingwood (1748-1810) lost his pet dog, Bounce, when it fell overboard from his flagship, HMS *Ville de Paris*, one night in the Mediterranean in 1809. Pets were banned from ships in 1975 as a precaution against rabies.

⁷⁸ [HMS Sandhurst](#), an escort vessel depot ship, was built as the 7,654-ton ss *Manipur* for the Brocklebank Line in 1905. She was purchased by the Admiralty in 1915 and converted to a depot ship in 1916. By the Second World War she had a displacement of 11,500 tons and a complement of 357. She was scrapped at Dalmuir in 1946.

⁷⁹ The First Lieutenant of a destroyer is the Wardroom Mess President and thus responsible for the conduct of officers in the wardroom. There was no restriction on the amount an officer could drink, a common Captain's Standing Order being "An officer's wine bill is his business, until he makes it my business". In a destroyer's wardroom there was a slate – a grid for each day's consumption – whereby an officer would write 111 in the

appropriate box for each of the three gins he had poured. In larger ships, and ashore, officers would sign a mess chit (form S.1828) for drinks at the wardroom bar and the mess accountant (an officer was given the job of being Wardroom Mess Secretary) would charge the drinks written and signed for to each officer's wine bill, to be settled at the end of the month. Any discrepancies would be charged to the Wardroom, the cost recovered from mess members, often on a stripe basis (the more stripes on your sleeve, the more you paid – all very democratic!

⁸⁰ The Union-Castle Line sailed between the UK and South Africa, and other ports in southern Africa. RMMV *Stirling Castle* (1935) was a troopship in the war and survived unscathed. RMMV – Royal Mail Motor Vessel.

⁸¹ Long gone, the NOP – properly, the Naval Officers; Pavilion – but known locally as 'El Enopy', was the clubhouse adjacent to the [sports grounds](#) by the southern boulevard in Gibraltar, close to the entrance of what was the shore establishment HMS *Rooke*. It is thought to have closed in the mid-1970s. All very different is 'The Rock' today!

⁸² King George VI awarded the whole island of Malta the George Cross on 15 Apr 1942 and the GC is on the flag of Malta to this day.

⁸³ HMS St Angelo was inside the fortress, rebuilt by the Order of Saint John between the 1530s and 1560s.

⁸⁴ Because of Malta's proximity to Italy, an Axis Power until the country's surrender on 8 Sep 1943, the HQ of the C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet moved from Malta to Alexandria.

⁸⁵ The [Suez Canal](#) was opened 17 Nov 1869 and is effectively the border between Africa and Asia. It is just over 120 miles in length and ships transit at about 8 knots (taking some 15 hours or more). From 1888 to 1956 the Suez Canal was considered neutral territory but under British protection; access was denied to the enemy throughout the ten years of both World Wars, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. Typically, ships cut a week to two weeks from their passage time when transiting the Suez Canal.

⁸⁶ These beautiful 40,700-ton fast battleships were two of the four Littorio class, built for the Italian Navy (the *Regia Marina*) between 1934 and 1942 (the fourth was never completed). *Italia* was named *Littorio* when in service with Mussolini's Navy. Both ships had surrendered to Admiral Cunningham at Malta in Sep 1943, then sailed to Alexandra to avoid German bombing and finally to the Bitter Lakes, where they remained until early 1947.

⁸⁷ The shore base HMS *Sheba* had been commissioned in Aden in 1940. Aden had been part of the British Empire since 1839.

⁸⁸ Addu Atoll is the southernmost atoll of the Maldives and the only atoll in the country with a natural harbour, a lagoon. A secret naval base, HMS *Haitan*, was commissioned there in 1941. The Maldives were a British Protectorate from 1887-1965.

⁸⁹ [HMS Victorious](#) (1939) was an [illustrious class](#) aircraft carrier, one of the first four of six built 1937-1941, the last two built 1941-1945. Some 23,000 tons (the last two, 26,000), their design speed was 32 knots; her ship's company was 1,392 in wartime (some 817 ship, 394 air group – as built) and she had a complement of 72 naval aircraft. All six carriers survived the war, HMS *Victorious* remaining in the Fleet for over a dozen years after the others had been scrapped; "the Vic" paid off in 1968 and was scrapped in 1969.

⁹⁰ A Leading Seaman was usually given the job of Ship's Postman, distributing the mail on board.

⁹¹ AB David Savin notes that he received some 333 letters from 12 May 1944 to 8 Jan 1946, and wrote some 274 letters to family and, perhaps, friends. AB Savin wrote an average of over three letters every week!

⁹² [Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser](#) (1888-1981) joined the Royal Navy in 1902. A Gunnery Officer – considered the most important specialisation in the first half of the Twentieth Century – he had been a prisoner of the Bolsheviks in 1920. He was the victor of the Battle of the North Cape on 26 Dec 1943. When C-in-C BPF he was 57 years old. See [Movietone News footage](#) of him speaking in Sydney: *The Navy is There*. After the Second World War, he was raised to the peerage as Lord Fraser of North Cape and was First Sea Lord from 1948-1951. He retired as an Admiral of the Fleet in Dec 1951.

⁹³ A ship sails 'in company with' a senior ship, the senior ship sailing with a junior ship 'in company.' The seniority of a ship stems from the seniority of the ship's captain on the 'Bridge Card'. The most junior ship in a Flotilla was called the 'Canteen Boat' and might expect to receive orders for more of the less attractive jobs! The seniority of Lt Cdr Basher Watkin (as a Lt Cdr) was 6 Jun 1943, not very senior but not the most junior destroyer captain in DF27.

⁹⁴ HMS *Whelp* and HMS *Wessex* had escorted the aircraft carrier HMS *Victorious* from Kilindini, in East Africa.

⁹⁵ [Len Ackroyd](#) recalled that, after a downed pilot had been recovered by HMS *Wager*, the aircraft carrier for which she was plane guard would be told that the pilot would be returned only in return for bread and sugar. There was no bakery in a destroyer. Whether this ploy ever worked in favour of HMS *Wager* is not recorded.

⁹⁶ The shore base HMS *Highflyer* had been commissioned at Trincomalee, Ceylon on 1 Jul 1943. Known as Trinco to the Royal Navy and its large, secure harbour described as the finest in the world. Ceylon was ceded to the British Crown in 1815.

⁹⁷ AFD1 was built in 1902 and perhaps 67 were built all told, some small and some very large indeed. AFD23 had been built in Bombay in Jul 1943 and sank in the accident on 8 Aug 1943. AFD23 was replaced by AFD22, the dock being towed out from Scotland.

⁹⁸ Australian Ns > Four N class destroyers had been transferred to the Royal Australian Navy 1940/41.

⁹⁹ [Uckers](#) is a game invented by Royal Navy sailors and common in the Fleet from the 1930s onwards; it is based on Ludo.

¹⁰⁰ Operation *Millet* > Vice Admiral Sir Arthur Power, C-in-C Eastern Fleet, flew his flag at sea for this operation, his fleet carrying out air strikes and bombardments of the Nicobar Islands.

¹⁰¹ On another occasion, the downed aircraft was close to HMS *Wager* and, as the destroyer closed the sinking aircraft, sailors witnessed the pilot throw out a suitcase. Sadly, as [Len Ackroyd](#) recalled, the aircraft sank before the young pilot himself got out; the suitcase was recovered and found to be full of clothes.

¹⁰² Bottom scrape – removal, in dry dock, of barnacles and other marine growth from a ship's hull.

¹⁰³ FO i/c (or FOIC) – Flag Officer-in-Charge, Bombay – I could not find the name of the admiral or establish the ship name of his HQ.

¹⁰⁴ VADs – [Voluntary Aid Detachment](#) nurses, supplementing care for armed forces' personnel

¹⁰⁵ [USS General A E Anderson](#) (1943) was a 20,000-ton troop transport, on passage from the US to India and on to Australia. She was named for a US Army general.

¹⁰⁶ HMS *Wizard* was still being repaired in the UK and would not be seen again by 27DF until Sydney in Aug 1945.

¹⁰⁷ A Ferry Carrier was the term for an Escort Carrier engaged in aircraft ferry duties in a Fleet. It was a duty allocation, not a full time role, but one that HMS *Atheling* carried out for the Eastern Fleet and the US Navy.

¹⁰⁸ Operation *Robson* – there is more detail, and a map, in *The Forgotten Fleet* by John Winton (qv) – pp 71-74.

¹⁰⁹ RFA – Royal Fleet Auxiliary, a Merchant Navy-manned service formed in 1905 to operate stores ships and oilers for the Royal Navy. It is wholly 'owned' by the Navy and, in the war, reported ultimately to Fourth Sea Lord.

¹¹⁰ OOD – Officer of the Day, a 24-hour duty in a roster for a ship alongside or safely secured in harbour.

¹¹¹ *The Fleet Air Arm Song Book* (privately published by the FAA c.1976) – over 200 pages of songs from c.1912 to the then present day, illustrated with wonderful cartoons by Tugg (Tugg Willson, a FAA officer). The verses were updated to include post-war aircraft and helicopters – 25 verses in all.

¹¹² A25 – A forms were Air Arm forms, some common to the RAF. The A25 was completed to report an accident involving an aircraft. Flying at sea, to and from ships pitching and rolling in sometimes heavy seas, is rather different and rather more dangerous than flying at air stations ashore – it requires a high level of pilot accomplishment. Accidents were not uncommon.

¹¹³ In the Clyde – this refers to flying trials in the relative safety of the waters of the Firth of Clyde, where a number of newly-built aircraft carriers would carry out flying trials as part of their Acceptance Trials. *Vic*, *Indom*, *Indefat* – HM aircraft carriers *Victorious*, *Indomitable*, *Indefatigable*.

¹¹⁴ The aircraft carriers HMS *Victorious* and HMS *Glorious*, the destroyer HMS *Noble*. When HM Queen Elizabeth II was on the throne, three carriers were named in the first verse, the other being the wartime escort carrier HMS *Queen*. There was no HMS *King*, probably because that was the surname of the Anglophobe Fleet Admiral Ernest King across the pond! It is not uncommon for naval personnel to change one word of the [National Anthem](#), when it is sung on naval and service occasions: Happy is changed to *Hermes* – 'Send Him *Victorious*, *Hermes* and *Glorious* ...'! A navy needs aircraft carriers 😊

¹¹⁵ Rear Admiral Sir Philip Vian had quite a reputation, forged first when the Tribal class destroyer HMS *Cossack* rescued 199 prisoners-of-war from the German tanker *Altmark* in 1940

¹¹⁶ British naval aviation dates from 1909 and was manifested in the First World War by the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). The RNAS and the Army's Royal Flying Corps (RFC) merged to form the Royal Air Force on 1 Apr 1918. From 1924 to 1937/1939, the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Air Force denied Admiralty control and, frankly, those fifteen years of RAF disinterest in naval aviation and the sea underline why the RAF should not be allowed anywhere near naval aviation. The RAF's negative impact on naval aviation before the Second World War had a serious impact *overall* on the operational ability of the Fleet Air Arm in the early years of the war.

¹¹⁷ A pendant number (pennant number from 1948) starts with a letter – the 'Flag Superior'. HMS *Wager* was R98 and then D30 in the BPF, reverting to R98. HMS *Kempenfelt* changed to D12 in the BPF and the 7 other destroyers were D30 through D36, in alphabetical order, starting with *Wager*. At least this change means that it is a little easier to identify a photograph of the ship and the likely date it was taken. In the Second World

War, cruisers and above did not wear their pendant numbers on the ship's side or the superstructure. Number 13 was never used as a pendant number.

¹¹⁸ A Boys – Naval aviators were part of the Air Branch of the Royal Navy, before the formal title of Fleet Air Arm was introduced, and officers – pilots and observers – wore an A in the curl of their stripes on their sleeves and shoulder boards.

¹¹⁹ Wikipedia article > [British Pacific Fleet](#)

¹²⁰ Australia is officially the Commonwealth of Australia.

¹²¹ The MO states that a shell fired by HMS *King George V* had hit the carrier HMS *Illustrious*, killing thirty and wounding thirty more.

¹²² Garden Island is the main naval base in Sydney Harbour.

¹²³ ASDIC was an acronym for Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee and anti-submarine equipment in ships was commonly referred to as ASDIC. Sonar is the better-known term post-war. There is an amusing story about the [history of the term ASDIC](#) – that no such committee ever existed!

¹²⁴ Name in manuscript in a junior officer's journal is not easy to decipher.

¹²⁵ The Marine Engineering Officer of a large ship is called 'Chief' by the Captain. His deputy is the 'Senior Engineer' and he is called 'Senior'. So, by extension, the deputy engineer was nicknamed 'Junior.' Lieutenant (E) R G Bastow took over from Tom Butlin as Engineer Officer in HMS *Wager*.

¹²⁶ 2½ is slang for Lieutenant Commander, as this rank on uniforms is two standard stripes of gold lace (as worn by a Lieutenant) but divided by a half stripe of gold lace – two-and-a-half stripes. Until 1875, the next rank after Lieutenant in the Royal Navy was Commander. In that year, the half stripe was introduced to indicate a Lieutenant of 8 years' seniority (or more) but he was still known as a Lieutenant. It was not until Mar 1914 that the formal rank of Lieutenant Commander was introduced. The captain of HMS *Wager*, and most destroyers bar the Leader and Half Leader, was a Lieutenant Commander. The rank is equivalent to Major in the British Army and Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force.

¹²⁷ The rating on the left is the author's father, AB (LTO) Walter May, then age 38. The name of the one-badge Leading Hand is not known but I would wager he was also a torpedoman, as ratings tended to go for a run ashore with a messmate not a shipmate from another mess.

¹²⁸ NAAFI – [Navy, Army & Air Force Institutes](#) was established in 1920 to provide recreational establishments for HM Armed Forces. HM Ships, certainly larger ships and some modern destroyers, would have a Canteen – a retail shop – run by a civilian NAAFI employee (but who would have been given a naval rating and 'taken on' the ship's books for the duration of the war), the Canteen Manager (*aka* Can Man), who lived – 'messed' – with naval ratings on board, sometimes in the Petty Officers' Mess. Ted Longshaw could not remember a NAAFI canteen in HMS *Wager* and, indeed, said there was no need for cash, except for gambling! NAAFI did very well indeed serving the BPF, "in the face of dock strikes, loading difficulties, shortages of boats, winches and refrigerated space, the climate and, of course, the great distances involved" (*The Forgotten Fleet*, pages 301-302).

¹²⁹ Bars in Sydney, in 1945, closed at 1800 and there was some local opposition to British sailors being able to drink in the NAAFI Fleet Canteen until 2100. Indeed, criticism of Sydney's licensing laws was mentioned in the BPF newspaper, *Pacific Post*, resulting in a news story in the [Gundagai Independent](#) on 9 Aug 1945.

¹³⁰ Photograph of eight WRNS Officers in whites, with the caption > "When these W.R.N.S. officers arrived in Australia to hold key positions in the organisation of the British Pacific Fleet, they reported to the senior W.R.N.S. officer in Australia, Chief Officer Betty Samuel, at the Royal Naval Officers' Club (*SMH*, 3 Feb 1945)

¹³¹ News story > ... The majority of the Royal Navy's letter mail goes by "Air Letter." These take 12 to 14 days from London to Sydney, and delivery to ships in the Pacific will be done entirely by air" (*SMH*, 5 Feb 1945)

¹³² Reporting the arrival of a FAA Salvage Unit, readers learned that "in the worst crash, 25% of the aircraft engine alone is undamaged" and "About 95% of propellers are straightened and used again."

¹³³ "The Royal Navy is rationing leave in Sydney because of a shortage of beds" and appealed to persons who could offer accommodation in homes or suburban halls (*SMH*, 13 Feb 1945)

¹³⁴ News story photo caption > "House Full sign displayed at the temporary premises of the British Centre at 321 Pitt St. and the men had to have their food in relays" (*SMH*, 13 Feb 1945)

¹³⁵ News story photo caption > "Two British sailors ... in the new canvas hotel ..." and a report in a later edition of "some 370 sailors taking advantage of temporary sleeping facilities in the marquee in Prince Alfred Park" and "breakfasts served 0530-0630 for ratings who had to report for duty by 0730 when leave was up". Up to 170 sailors were reported as sleeping at the YMCA (*SMH*, mostly 19 Feb 1945)

¹³⁶ The [Admiralty Islands](#) were given the name by Captain Philip Carteret RN in 1767. For thirty years from 1884, the forty-island archipelago was administered as a German colony. After the First World War, the islands were governed by Australia, under a mandate from the League of Nations. Manus is the largest island of the

group, located in the Bismarck Sea, north of what is now Papua New Guinea. Manus is where Japanese forces landed on 7 Apr 1942. The islands were taken by American forces between Feb and May 1944, after which the US set up a huge [naval base](#) and airfields, with one outstanding main road, all abandoned after war's end.

¹³⁷ The BPF Fleet Train is described in some detail in *The Forgotten Fleet* by John Winton – Chapter Nine. He lists the ships that formed the Fleet Train in Appendix A, pp 394-395; they included an Accommodation Ship, Repair Ships, Maintenance Ships, a Command Ship for the Logistic Supply Group, Air Maintenance and Repair Ships, Air Stores Ships, Fleet Oilers, Water Carriers, Distilling Ships, a Net Layer, Salvage Vessels, Hospital Ships, Armament Store Carriers and Issuing Ships, Naval Store Carriers and Issuing Ships, Victualling Store Carriers and Issuing Ships, a Collier, Tugs and two Admiralty Floating Docks (all told 92 ships and two AFDs). Vice Admiral Charles Daniel was VA(Q) – Vice Admiral (Administration) – in charge of the BPF's Fleet Train, based in Sydney. Captain Stephen Roskill RN, the Official Historian, wrote (in *The War at Sea 1939-1945*, Vol II Part II), "... if unspectacular compared with command of a fighting squadron, [the post of VA(Q)] was certainly one of the most arduous allocated to a British flag officer during the entire war." At sea commanding the Fleet Train, effectively deputy to VA(Q), was Rear Admiral D B Fisher. By VJ Day, the Fleet Train and its warship escorts consisted of 125 ships, totalling 712,000 tons, manned by 26,200 officers and men.

¹³⁸ Vice Admiral Sir Bernard Rawlings – VABPF (Vice Admiral BPF) – commander the BPF at sea, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser remaining at the Sydney HQ (Fraser was too senior in the Pacific to be at sea, given the seniorities of some of the US Admirals at sea).

¹³⁹ [HMS King George V](#) (1939) was the lead ship of a class of five Battleships, all launched 1939-1940. Some 35,000 tons, with considerable armoured protection, her main armament was 10 x 14-inch guns and 16 x 5.25-inch guns (HMS *Wager* had 4.7" guns). Her maximum speed was 29 knots and she had a ship's company of 1,555. The battleships HMS *Howe* and HMS *Duke of York* were sister ships. HMS *Prince of Wales* was lost off Malaya on 10 Dec 1941. The other four, including HMS *Anson*, survived the war and were scrapped 1957-1959.

¹⁴⁰ A clean and tidy ship is a happy ship and a happy ship is a safe ship. It is easy to forget that a ship is a dangerous place in which to work – and the danger of the sea is omnipresent.

¹⁴¹ Fleet Admiral Ernest King USN, Chief of Naval Operations, in particular; he was a known Anglophobe.

¹⁴² [Ulithi Atoll](#) is in the Caroline Islands, now part of the Federated States of Micronesia. Germany had purchased the islands in 1899 and the Japanese peacefully occupied them in 1914. Abandoned by Japan by 1944, the Americans found Ulithi Atoll to be an ideal staging post for their Pacific 'island hopping' operations from 1944 and built up a huge naval base. In Mar 1945 there were 647 ships at anchor in Ulithi Atoll, rising to a peak number of 722 in the following weeks.

¹⁴³ The name Formosa ('beautiful island') dates from 1542 when Portuguese sailors first noted it on their maps. It continued to be known to Westerners as Formosa but the historic name of Taiwan too hold ass the island developed rapidly after the Second World War. [Taiwan](#) was ruled by Japan from 1895-1945.

¹⁴⁴ Planning for the Fleet Train (Task Force 112) did not begin until it was agreed with the Americans, at the Québec Conference of Sep 1944, that a British Fleet should serve in the Pacific. Even then, the way a British Fleet should be deployed in the Pacific was not agreed until Dec 1944. The first elements of the Fleet Train arrived in Australia in Jan 1945. John Winton writes, in *The Forgotten Fleet*, "The Fleet Train on the Pacific was one of the most remarkable examples of the national British genius for what is known as 'muddling through'. [It was] a masterpiece of improvisation, its operations triumphs of endeavour over circumstances. ... [It] was formed from what ships were available, manned with such personnel as were available, and sent out to the Pacific as they became available, in varying states of capability, efficiency and morale."

¹⁴⁵ Action Stations – the highest state of readiness – meant the ship's company was in two watches. A lower state of readiness in the post-war Navy was 'Defence Watches,' allowing more sleep for some and better meals than a 'pot mess' (a sort of stew, easy to eat using one's hands and a fork or spoon). In ordinary steaming, in relatively safe waters, in wartime, watchkeeping was 1 in 3, except for the very few 'dayworkers' who did not keep watches.

¹⁴⁶ Journal of Stoker Ted Elwick (the Engineer Officer's Writer (EO's clerk and record keeper)) – page 4.

¹⁴⁷ Aircraft Carriers needed frequently to change course 'into wind' in order to afford the best conditions to fly off and land aircraft.

¹⁴⁸ Sailors were well-known for making things at sea, and repairing things, and it was traditional that sailors had an afternoon off work when in calm seas and fine weather, in order to make and mend clothes. This tradition became the 'make and mend', an afternoon off for self-maintenance of one kind or another. I still have a small knitted figure, the size of a woman's hand, made for me as a baby by my former Able Seaman father.

¹⁴⁹ HMS *Wager*, like most ships in the Royal Navy, fed its sailors with Broadside Messing. This system of message would have been recognised by the sailors at sea in the Age of Sail through, in some cases, to the small Boom Defence Vessels still in commission in the early 1960s. Food preparation was by cooks in the main

galley, while the duty cook of the mess, the 'cook of the day' (who was not a cook!) in each of the ships' messes of around 12-16 men, had earlier organised the peeling by his messmates of sufficient potatoes, prepared the mess tables and cutlery, brought the food from the galley on trays and in fannies to his messdeck. There was a very small allowance per man for the mess to buy foodstuffs of their choice. He cleared up afterwards and, at night, everything to do with cooking and eating would be cleared to the sides and hammocks slung. (See the article 'Battleship Provisioning' by Lester May > *The Naval Review*, Vol 112 Number 3 (Summer 2024), pp 421-428 + Roger Plumtree's follow-up article, pp 428-438).

¹⁵⁰ This description of food is from *The Forgotten Fleet* by John Winton (page 157). He writes "... when *Indefatigable's* Chief Cook was awarded a DSM [Distinguished Service Medal], the ship's company were convinced it was for his ingenuity as 'Distinguished Spud Maker'; *Indomitable's* ship's company were less charitable; in one of the ship's 'Suggestion Boxes' one correspondent wondered whether it was Their Lordships' intention that *Indomitable* should return to the United Kingdom with 'a skeleton crew'."

¹⁵¹ Journal of Stoker Elwick – page 4.

¹⁵² Action Stations was the highest state of readiness and, generally, that would mean the sailors wearing [anti-flash gear](#). This was uncomfortable in cold climes but in the Tropics it would be unbearable.

¹⁵³ The organisation for mail in the BPF was good. John Winton writes, in *The Forgotten Fleet*, "In addition to offices at San Francisco and Colombo, fleet mail offices were set up at Sydney, Fremantle and Brisbane, Manus and Leyte and, after the defeat of Japan, at Hong Kong and Shanghai. The experienced nucleus of the mail office staff were ex-GPO employees who after a short period of naval training were given RNVR commissions or rated Writers (Postal). ... The route for first-class mail from the United Kingdom to the fleet at sea was long and precarious; by air, via Colombo or San Francisco, to Australia; by RAF Dakota to Manus and Leyte; by escorts of the Logistic Support Groups to the fleet, where bags of mail were transferred at sea. Some mail was lost in aircraft accidents, or jettisoned by aircraft in difficulties, and mail was always liable to be off-loaded at any stage on the route. ... A card index system assisted mail officers to identify the '946 Smiths and 630 Jones' in the BPF. The task was complicated by letters addressed to '*HMS Same as Before*' or '*HMS Same Old Gashbarge*,' written by wives or girl friends who had assumed that their naval correspondent's normal letter heading was the official name of his ship."

¹⁵⁴ DSB – Duty Service Boat [?].

¹⁵⁵ RFA *Fort Alabama* was one of a number of 7,200-ton stores ships built in Vancouver in early 1944.

¹⁵⁶ Acknowledgement of appointment > this formal letter was standard practice when I was serving, too, the letter beginning, "I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of my appointment to HM Ship *Nonsuch*, under your command ..." and afforded a chance to indicate the officer's plan for joining unless otherwise instructed. The letter ended very formally, "I have the honour to be, Sir, Your obedient Servant ...". Interesting that this continued in the war, with all those wartime-only officers!

¹⁵⁷ The Gunnery School was HMS *Excellent* on Whale Island, Portsmouth Harbour.

¹⁵⁸ Pilots and Observers in the Royal Navy are naval officers first and naval aviators second. Like all seaman (executive) officers, they were required to earn a Bridge Watchkeeping Certificate and, when not borne for flying duties in a ship, were expected to stand a watch on the bridge as OOW (Officer of the Watch).

¹⁵⁹ Winnie – Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965). King George VI (1895-1952; reigned 1936-1952).

¹⁶⁰ A ship's First Lieutenant is the second-in-command, and is also known as the Executive Officer. To the wardroom he is 'Number One' and to the lower deck he is 'The Jimmy.'

¹⁶¹ Relief – the officer who will take over one's duties on board (Sub Lieutenant Lee, in this case).

¹⁶² In my time in the Royal Navy (1967-1989), after each visit to a port the Heads of Department contributed towards up-dating the Port Guide, an informal guide to business and pleasure in ports such as Auckland, Bombay, Cartagena, Dakar, East London, Fremantle, Georgetown, Halifax, Istanbul, Juneau, Kaohsiung, Lisbon, Middlesbrough, Narvik, Piraeus, Québec, Roosevelt Roads, San Diego, Travemünde, Valletta, Willemstad, Xiamen, Yokohama, Zeebrugge ...

¹⁶³ NO – Naval Officer.

¹⁶⁴ This confirms that three destroyers of 27DF were detached from the BPF to undergo refit in Auckland: first, HMS *Wakeful* from March to May 1945, HMS *Wager* 19 May to 13 Jul 1945, HMS *Wessex* 6 Jul to late Aug 1945. HMS *Kempfenfelt* and HMS *Whelp* refitted in Melbourne between May and Jul 1945. HMS *Whirlwind* refitted in Sydney from Jun to Aug 1945. HMS *Wizard*, of course, did not come out from UK, after her year-long accident repairs, until Aug 1945. All these refits were necessary after a year and more of hard running at sea but were intended, too, to prepare the 27DF for what was hoped to be the final attacks on Japan to end the war by some time in 1946. The two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 Aug, and the surrender of Japan on 15 Aug 1945, not only changed the course of history but the fortunes of 27DF.

- ¹⁶⁵ The Gunnery Officer's leaving HMS *Wager* in Sydney in late Jul 1945 is bad news for this story of HMS *Wager*, as his journal also ends and, thus, we are deprived of information and tales of their post-war time in the Pacific. It seems that he did not really want to leave the ship in late Jul 1945 either.
- ¹⁶⁶ See note in the Acknowledgements – Ted Longshaw's recollections over a pint or two in 2010!
- ¹⁶⁷ Thus, we learn that Guns' Embarkation Leave ended on 14/15 Jul 1944. He would return to the ship, in order to relieve another officer for his week or so of Embarkation Leave.
- ¹⁶⁸ RMMV *Stirling Castle* was the same troopship that was escorted to Gibraltar by HMS *Wager* in Jul 1944.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ping Sub – a Sub Lieutenant expert in ASDIC (Sonar).
- ¹⁷⁰ [RMS Rangitata](#) (1929) was a handsome 16,737-ton ocean passenger liner operated by the New Zealand Shipping Company on the Wellington to London service (via the Panama Canal). She had been requisitioned for service as a troopship and was returned to merchant service after the war. She was sold for scrap in 1962.
- ¹⁷¹ Gash is the naval slang for rubbish. Gash was disposed of overboard in those days! A 'gash hand' was therefore someone who had the jobs no one else on board wanted or, when awaiting passage, no proper job at all and, therefore, liable to be given odd jobs by the Senior Naval Officer in the port.
- ¹⁷² [HMS Quilliam](#) was the Leader of the Q class, the 4th Destroyer Flotilla.
- ¹⁷³ Dick (Lieutenant Trowbridge), Chief (another nickname for the Engineer Officer), Doc (Temp Surg Lt George Gayman), Lee (his relief, newly joined), Murdo (presumably Midshipman Murdoch), Junior (Sub Lieutenant (E) Brain – name written in manuscript is not easy to decipher).
- ¹⁷⁴ Flimsy – a summary of an officer's report written by the captain. The full report was typed on form S.206 – Officer's Confidential Report.
- ¹⁷⁵ [HMS Quilliam](#) had been repaired at Leyte in Jun 1945 to make her sufficiently seaworthy but not operational. When she sailed for home from Sydney, she headed east, passing through the Panama Canal in Aug 1945. Then on to Bermuda and across the North Atlantic to Chatham, where repairs were effected in Oct 1945. She was placed on the Disposal List and sold to the Royal Netherlands Navy, being commissioned as HNLMS *Banckert* on 11 Nov 1945. She was refitted and further repaired in the Netherlands and served the Dutch Navy until she was paid off in 1952. She was scrapped in 1957.
- ¹⁷⁶ Jervis Bay, about 90 miles south of Sydney, is the port of Canberra in the [Jervis Bay Territory](#), an internal territory of Australia.
- ¹⁷⁷ Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz (1885-1966) was one of three US Admirals promoted to five-star rank on 14 Dec 1944 (a rank to be held, with the pay, for life), the intention being to ensure comparability in rank with officers of other Allied navies*. Nimitz, a submariner, was Commander-in-Chief Pacific Ocean Areas. He went on to be head of the US Navy vice Ernest King, serving as Chief of Naval Operations from late 1945 to 1947, and then he retired. [* ABC, First Sea Lord from Oct 1943, was promoted to Admiral of the Fleet in 1943].
- ¹⁷⁸ ['Hammy Gray'](#) (1917-1945) was Senior Pilot of 1841 Naval Air Squadron, in the aircraft carrier HMS *Formidable*. He had been awarded a DSC on 28 Jul 1945. Leading at attack on shipping in Onagawa Wan, off the island of Honshu, on 9 Aug 1945, Gray showed great valour in pressing home the attack on a Japanese escort vessel, IJS *Amakusa*, which he sank. He lost his life, his aircraft hit and in flames. He was awarded a posthumous VC for great valour, "for brilliant fighting spirit and most inspiring leadership" (*The London Gazette*, 13 Nov 1945).
- ¹⁷⁹ The show was presented for a season at *The London Palladium* after the war.
- ¹⁸⁰ The main targets for kamikaze pilots were aircraft carriers but, if those targets were missed or not possible to attack, the pilots would go for other ships, such as the destroyers in the screen around the capital ships.
- ¹⁸¹ Probably the newly-converted 800-bed hospital ship, [USS Benevolence](#), which had arrived 29 Aug 1945.
- ¹⁸² HRH The Duke of Edinburgh told this story to the BBC. In Tokyo Bay in the days before the surrender, HMS *Whelp* was sent to ferry released prisoners of war out to aircraft carriers. "I went down to the messdecks to see what was going on and they were sitting, being given a cup of tea," he remembers, "and both sides had tears pouring down their faces. It was an absolutely amazing sensation."
- ¹⁸³ Hong Kong was an important naval base for the Royal Navy, its shore establishment known as HMS *Tamar*. British since 1841, it remained so until 1997, bar the Japanese occupation 1941-1945. The Crown Colony surrendered on 25 Dec 1941 to Japanese Forces and spent [three years and eight months](#) occupied, under the Emperor's yoke. Hong Kong was handed over by the Japanese Imperial Army to the Royal Navy on 30 Aug 1945 and Admiral Harcourt received the formal surrender on 16 Aug 1945.
- ¹⁸⁴ The C-in-C, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, was an observer at the signing.
- ¹⁸⁵ Splice the Mainbrace is signalled to a fleet to order the issuing of a tot of rum to the ship's company – to raise a toast. Clearly, on this occasion it was to mark the re-occupation of Hong Kong. Rum was issued to those on the Lower Deck who were age 20 or over and who had elected to draw the tot daily. On the occasion of Splice the Mainbrace, officers (who were not entitled to a free tot of rum daily) were included.

¹⁸⁶ Canton – now called [Guangzhou](#) – is not far NW of Hong Kong.

¹⁸⁷ [Pearl River](#)

¹⁸⁸ Mid-Autumn Festival *aka* Mooncake Festival or Moon Festival – usually a public holiday. It is the second most important festival after Chinese New Year.

¹⁸⁹ HMS *Unicorn* (1941) was built as a Maintenance Carrier but was sometimes used as an operational unit. She looked much the same as other light fleet carriers of the Colossus class and the Majestic class.

¹⁹⁰ In Vietnam, east of Hanoi.

¹⁹¹ Indian soldiers had been PoWs at Hon Dau camp; it is now a popular holiday destination.

¹⁹² LCT – Landing Craft Tank, a flat-bottomed craft ideal for work in shallow waters.

¹⁹³ The toast to Vice Admiral Lord Nelson – ‘To the Immortal Memory’ – is made in silence.

¹⁹⁴ From 1910-1970 a Royal Navy ship’s whaler was the [Montagu Whaler](#). Open to the elements, these were usually clinker-built 27-ft boats. One would be carried by a destroyer, with a six-man crew, and it was used for a variety of purposes, the main role being the ship’s ready-use sea boat. Ready for such as “Man Overboard, man overboard. Away sea boat’s crew,” piped over the ship’s main broadcast. In the drawing at the top of the article, the whaler can clearly be seen near the funnel.

¹⁹⁵ Signalmen – sailors whose business was visual signalling and flags. One would be duty on the bridge ready for the Captain or the Officer of the Watch to order “Make a Signal” ...

¹⁹⁶ AB Derrick Pullen, the quartermaster on duty in HMS *Kempenfelt*, was seriously injured. The destroyer seems not to have been long delayed by the need to repair damage, as it is [reported online](#) that she returned to Chatham by Jan 1946.

¹⁹⁷ Singapore, an important base for the Royal Navy – the shore base was HMS *Terror* and the RN air station was HMS *Nabrock*, later HMS *Simbang* – was [occupied by the Japanese](#) for three and a half terrible years. Liberation came on 5 Sep 1945 with the [arrival of the cruiser HMS Sussex](#), flagship of Rear Admiral Cedric Holland.

¹⁹⁸ Rabbits were originally goods stolen from the ship but the term became used for presents purchased in foreign ports to take home.

¹⁹⁹ See the photograph of the [destroyer HMS Cavalier](#) flying her paying-off pennant from the mainmast. Ships would commission for, say, two years, and the pay off. A new ship’s company would then embark for the next commission. That practice is no longer, not since the 1950s perhaps, but a ship will certainly fly a paying-off pennant at the end of her final commission.

²⁰⁰ The Canadian MO, Temporary Surgeon Lieutenant George Gayman, returned to Canada in the famous French liner *Ile de France*, sailing from Southampton. He was met by his wife on the jetty in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

²⁰¹ Irritated somewhat by HM Government’s handling of VJ Day 80, its not mentioning the BPF at all on the second-rate website (it’s mostly about VE Day), I sent a letter on 14 Aug 2025 to the national, regional press and maritime press, and the letter was published on the Nautilus International newspaper – [Nautilus Telegraph](#) – website within an hour and in the following days in other regional titles.

²⁰² There are about 17,000 people alive in the UK (in 2025) who are 100 years old or more (over 80% of them are women); there are over 200 supercentenarians, those who are 110 or more. There is a HMS *Wager* centenarian! Stoker Alfred Conway was at the VJ Day 80 commemoration at the National Memorial Arboretum on 15 Aug 2025.

²⁰³ As a boy, in Peckham, south London, [Ted Longshaw](#) was expecting to follow in his father’s footsteps, as a van driver. On leaving the Navy in 1946, age 20, Ted Longshaw’s vocational training course was laundry engineering. He started work with a firm, by a stroke of luck was quickly made supervisor, and then started his own business. He made his fortune – literally. He was Master of The Worshipful Company of Launderers 1989-1990.

²⁰⁴ This photograph also appears on page 232 of *The British Pacific Fleet* by David Hobbs. The caption reads: “A pilot being transferred from HMS *Wager* to a replenishment carrier to collect a new aircraft. ...”

²⁰⁵ *Battle Honours of the Royal Navy* by Lt Cdr Ben Warlow RN (Maritime Books, 2004). He does list HMS *Wager* with EAST INDIES 1944 and OKINAWA 1945, whereas *British Warship Names* by Capt T D Manning and Cdr C F Walker (Putnam, 1959) lists only OKINAWA 1945. Ben Warlow (1938-2013) was my Training Officer in HMS *Bulwark* in 1973 and we served together in 1974 too, so he is bound to be right! Ben and I stayed in touch until his death; his head was full of knowledge about the Royal Navy, particularly ships of the Second World War, and he provided a useful resource for me on many occasions. He may have made one mistake, though, as HMS *Wrangler* (1943) does not appear in his book at all!

²⁰⁶ Personally, I do not approve of retrospective medals for the Second World War. I take the view that, if the medals authorised for service in the conflict were good enough for HM King George VI, Winston Churchill and Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, then that issue is good enough for me.

²⁰⁷ HM Ships' Bells are much sought after and sometimes recovered from wrecks. Every so often, the Admiralty auctions those bells collected from ships recently paid off. The bell of HMS *Wager* was on prominent display in May 1981 at the farmhouse home of retired Captain Basher Watkin in Jurby when I had lunch with him, accompanying the Captain of HMS *Hydra* (the ship visiting Douglas, Isle of Man). It is understood that one of Basher's daughters has the bell, at her home in New Zealand. See the photograph of the [ship's bell](#) of the destroyer HMS *Cavalier*, preserved at Chatham Historic Dockyard. A ship's bell would be placed on display in harbour, or perhaps on a sea day with VIPs on board in calm waters, but it was otherwise stowed away safely and securely – ships' bells are heavy and not something King Neptune would want to see when he was stirring the waters.

²⁰⁸ [Algeria](#) was occupied by France in 1830 and, from 1848 until independence in 1962, the country was administered as a *département* of France. In the Second World War, it was run by Vichy France until the allied invasion of French North Africa, Operation *Torch*, in Nov 1942.

²⁰⁹ 60,000 nautical miles on passage from A to B and B to C and so on. Impossible to know how many more miles were travelled zig-zagging and searching the oceans for downed pilots, and going around the fleet with mails, stores and people, as well as journeys here and there that are not recorded. Perhaps 60,000 to 70,000 miles all told – what a pity there were no 'Sea Miles' points for Sailors! I used a [sea distances calculator](#) (but added them all up using mental arithmetic!).

²¹⁰ Article written by Lester May for [The Naval Review](#) – posted online 10 Nov 2024. It contains details of all the naval and maritime war memorials in the capital, not just those relating to the Second World War.

²¹¹ [Oswald Edward Longshaw](#). Ted told me he had learned more about what HMS *Wager* was doing, from the work put in for the HMS *Wager* website, than he ever knew while serving on board as an 18 and 19-year-old matelot! He volunteered to join the Royal Navy in 1943, on his 17th birthday. Ted completed his Signalmans training at HMS *Scotia*, at Doonfoot, Ayr. In Jan 1946, after the ship paid off, he was loaned to HMS *Daedalus*, RNAS Lee-on-Solent, to help man the air station's telephone exchange. He left the RN perhaps in 1947 and some of his subsequent life is told in the Wikipedia article.

²¹² An easy mistake! Years ago, researching my family history with the help of Ancestry.co.uk, in an idle moment I sought to find out how HM Ships appeared in the 1901 Census; HMS *Pallas* was transcribed from the manuscript original as HMS *Dallas* – we know what the young person in the Indian sub-continent, who was typing the pages for family history researchers, was watching on television! An easy mistake!

²¹³ *Semper fidelis* – always faithful – is the motto of the US Marine Corps. The USMC traces its history back to 1775. *Semper fi* is often used as a friendly salute, or farewell salute. The Royal Marines date from 28 Oct 1664 and their motto is *Per Mare, Per Terram* – By Sea, By Land. The Royal Navy has no motto (although most HM Ships and Naval Air Squadrons do so) and there is no agreed founding date, for its origins are lost to history. I'd wager well over 1,100 years of history; [Wikipedia](#) states 1546 for the founding of the English Royal Navy but states that the English had less-organised naval forces for centuries prior to this. The founding date of the Royal Scots Navy (Old Scots Navy) is similarly lost to history but sometime in the Middle Ages will suffice.